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OUR VICAR.

A Novel.

BY

WYNTER FRORE KNIGHT, B.C.L.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOI.. III.



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OUR VICAR.



CHAPTER I.

THE REV. HERCULES STEPTOE.

FOR a week or two Pollington, with its proverbial love of gossip and Athenian passion for hearing of some new thing, had nothing else to talk about than the new young curate.

On his first appearance in church there was quite a flutter of excitement, many of the young ladies standing on their hassocks in order to get a better view of him.

The Chubbs were present in full force, and took particular stock of him, as opportunity

offered, in the progress of the service. Whilst the Creed was being recited, the new curate had to face all the members of that family, owing to the peculiarity of their ritual in always turning to the west when the officiating minister faced east, and this gave them an excellent opportunity for comparing notes in an undertone.

As Steptoe began in a loud voice :

“ I believe in —— ”

‘ A good-looking chap,’ muttered old Chubb to his wife.

‘ And with money, too, so Hatter says,’ rejoined that prudent lady, under her breath.

‘ Oh ! my ! His hair’s parted down the middle !’ whispered Miss Chubb to Rosy, without turning her head.

‘ Hasn’t he a nice nose !’ said the latter to her brother.

‘ Turns up like yours,’ rejoined that youth with immovable features, looking straight into Steptoe’s face.

‘ A pleasant mouth, too, though large,’ continued Rosy, looking into her Prayer-book.

‘A regular gash,’ remarked one brother.

‘Big enough for you to get in,’ muttered another, without apparently moving his lips.

‘It’s a pity he has gone to Mrs. Chine’s,’ observed Mrs. Chubb, with a devout look at the rafters.

‘From the look of him, he is a match for any number of Chines,’ monotoned her husband, in a deep, solemn bass.

“*Amen,*” said Steptoe, finishing the Belief: in which final word all the Chubbs, having concluded the recitation of the articles of their own faith as given above, devoutly joined.

After service the congregation gathered in groups round the church and on the green to discuss the new curate. Several invitations to dinner were interchanged in order to compare notes more at leisure, and during the week innumerable morning calls were made by the ladies on one another, that they might retail all the scraps of information which each had collected.

Each feature of Steptoe’s was minutely discussed with care—his head, eyes, mouth,

teeth, hands, and feet. Ingenious deductions were made from the style and texture of his clothes, and most of the parishioners were deeply impressed by the fact that he used thicknote-paper, ornamented with a double crest. The use of the double crest arose in this way. The new curate's grandfather's name was originally *Step*. He had married a Miss *Toe*, who said to her friends when the engagement was announced, that although she had taken a *Step*, she did not wish to lose a *Toe*; and accordingly, at her request, her husband assumed her maiden name and family crest in addition to his own. Mr. Hatter found the double name an ingenious instrument of torture ready-made to hand, when after a brief while he began to get jealous of the popularity acquired by his new subordinate. He would then write to him short, uncivil notes, beginning either with 'Dear Mr. Step,' or 'Dear Mr. Toe,' as if he had forgotten the full name, or were uncertain as to its orthography: a vulgar device, to which perhaps a third-rate attorney's clerk might descend, but which was somewhat

remarkable as coming from a man of Hatter's education and position.

Steptoe was a good-looking, well-made fellow over six feet in height, with a bright, cheerful look, yet with a face betokening resolution and decision. He wore his hair cut rather short, and parted down the middle, as Miss Chubb has already informed the reader. He was very careful in his dress, and his collars especially were spoken of as immaculate in get up, and perfect in set.

He was soon a general favourite, for he had many pleasing and acceptable gifts. He was a good cricketer, an excellent croquet-player, an unflinching dancer, and could tell stories and jokes by the hour together.

Plainton never ceased wondering at his powers of speech, and he fully believed that if Steptoe were set to talk at six in the morning and asked to go on till he was tired, he would be found still at it with undiminished freshness at the same hour in the evening.

When he and Plainton happened to be asked out together, the latter always rejoiced,

for he could then look quietly on and make studies of life and character without being expected to do anything ; while his fellow-curate would talk to most of the people in the room at once, through the extraordinary faculty he had cultivated and brought to the highest perfection of attracting and engaging the attention of one person after another as he developed some entertaining story.

His powers as a croquet-player deserve especial mention. He carried always his own mallet, which he had made to order, and which was very large and heavy. It was currently reported in Pollington that he slept with it under his pillow. And Mrs. Chine affirmed that she once saw it sticking out of his surplice in church, but this was generally believed to be an optical illusion.

The two curates became excellent friends. And occasionally Steptoe would call for Plainton on a Monday to go for a walk. The latter really liked him, for he said he was perfectly honest, honourable, and kind-hearted. Steptoe never stopped talking for

a moment the whole time they were together. One day he ingenuously remarked to Margaret, when he had called for her brother :

‘I know I bore your brother dreadfully with my talk, I can see it in his face ; but I cannot help it. I must talk, or I shall split. Besides, it is really good for him. He wants poking up. He thinks too much.’

One day he shouted out to Plainton, whom he saw across the road :

‘Hi ! Plainton ! Here ! I have such a good joke.’

Plainton went over to him.

‘What is it ?’

‘Oh ! it is too good,’ he exclaimed, shaking from head to foot with laughter.

‘The Vicar has told everybody that I am immensely rich.’

‘Yes, he told me so, too.’

‘Ha ! ha ! What awful crackers he tells ! I wonder where he expects to go to—— My dear fellow, I haven’t a brass farthing. Isn’t it good ?’

In other conversations Plainton had with

him, he learnt that Mr. Hatter had repeated his stock allurements,—of the certainty of the new curate having the speedy offer of a good living, and of the thirty heiresses in Polington and its neighbourhood, each of whom was waiting for exactly such a man as Steptoe to come and marry her.

Mr. and Mrs. Hatter had one or two long interviews with Mrs. Chine before the new curate's arrival, in which they gave her hints as to the management of her lodger, and the careful observation of his sayings and doings.

‘ You must also take care to feed him well,’ said Mrs. Hatter, striking her fist upon her hand, as if she were then and there ramming the food into Steptoe's open mouth. ‘ He must be kept up to his work like Hetty's donkey, or any other animal.’

Soon after his new subordinate's arrival, Mr. Hatter received a letter from Lord Greyling, in which he stated that Dr. Cartwright, the Rector of Cunningstone—the living which had been promised to Hatter ever since his

marriage—was very unwell, and had even spoken of resigning his living.

‘Dear me!’ said Hatter to his wife, it is almost a pity I went to the expense of engaging Steptoe, for although Plainton has looked very unwell lately, and I think will ultimately break down, he might possibly have held out till I leave.’

‘Oh! you cannot tell what may happen to a man like Dr. Cartwright. He has been ill off and on for the last ten years, and will very likely recover.’

‘Well, it is possible, of course.’

‘He is evidently a man without a conscience, or he would have died long ago. It is a monstrous thing that he should have kept you waiting twelve years for that living.’

‘You see, my dear, £2,000 a year and a splendid house are a good deal to give up without a struggle.’

‘Could you not make it worth his while to hasten his departure, now he is feeling shaky.’

‘I have thought of that for some time past. I can sound him on it, at any rate.’

When Steptoe had been with Mrs. Chine about a month, Plainton happened to call and find him out.

Mrs. Chine begged him to stay a few minutes, as she wished particularly to speak to him.

‘I am sure, Mr. Plainton, you will forgive me telling you anything about your brother curate; but he is so unkind to me that if he does not alter, I must leave the house.’

‘I think you had better speak to *him* about that.’

‘Oh! but he is a perfect tyrant. I dare not open my mouth. If I say a word about anybody in the parish he tells me to “shut-up.” It is truly dreadful.’

‘I know nothing about Mr. Steptoe’s affairs, Mrs. Chine.’

‘But something must be done. I thought that when Mr. Hatter sent him to board with me, I should be treated as a lady. But he never takes me to any croquet-parties, nor out to dinner, nor anywhere. I am no better off than if I was a lodging-house keeper.’

‘Mrs. Chine!’ said Plainton, in amazement ;
‘Mr. Steptoe cannot invite you to other people’s houses. You must be mad to think of such a thing.’

‘None of his friends ask to see me when they call.’

‘Of course not. His arrangement with you is purely a business matter. Mr. Hatter no doubt explained that to you.’

‘He said it would be very nice for me, and give me a much higher standing, but I do not see that it makes any difference.’

‘It is a great pity that you should be under such a misapprehension. What you expect is an utter impossibility. But you had better talk to your lodger about it.’

Plainton then hurried away to church, as it happened to be a saint’s day, and there was morning service. The Vicar was not there, having made an appointment with his corn doctor. When the service was over, Plainton remained in the vestry.

‘Are you not coming just yet?’ asked Steptoe.

‘No, I think it is better to wait till everybody is clear away.’

‘I have noticed you do this before.’

‘I am obliged to do so,’ he replied apologetically, ‘as so many people hinder me one after another, and they have really nothing to say.’

‘You miserable victim !’

‘And I in consequence lose one or two precious hours, which I can ill afford.’

‘Why do you not escape by the vestry door?’

‘I tried that for some time, and it answered very well ; but latterly I have found it blocked up by the more enterprising interviewers, who run round into the Grove as soon as service is over. The north door and vestry door are both blocked now,’ said Plainton, dolefully.

‘But this cannot be the case every day.’

‘Yes, unfortunately it is.’

‘Well, I’ll look.’

Steptoe cautiously mounted up to one of the windows on the north side and peeped.

‘You are quite right. There is Mrs. Chine

close to the door, Miss Medusa about fifty yards on, and Miss Corbyn on the other side the Green. Wretched man! You are lost on this side.'

He then took a survey on the vestry side.

'There are five here,' he shouted, 'all clustered together, and others stationed at intervals, who have not the honour of my acquaintance. You gay deceiver! What is the meaning of it?'

'Ah!' said his companion, 'I am afraid I shall not be able to get home to luncheon to-day. It is very terrible,' wiping the perspiration off his forehead.

'Well, my dear fellow,' said Steptoe, compassionately, 'I fear there is no help for you, unless you get a balloon, or dodge them along the roof. That would beat them, I think.'

'I have foreseen for some time,' said Plainton, pulling out a small writing-case, 'that it would come to this. The danger has gradually increased week after week. I have therefore brought my sermon with me in case it should be so. They will go away when

they get hungry, and I shall perhaps get home in the afternoon or evening.'

Steptoe sat on the vestry table swinging his long legs backwards and forwards as he enjoyed his companion's misery. Suddenly he jumped up, and looking very energetic and courageous, said :

' I will disinfect the atmosphere for you.'

' Oh ! no, don't expose yourself, thank you. It will be just as bad for you.'

' Not at all ; I know how to manage it. I will clear the north door to begin with, but you must give me a little time before you come out.'

Steptoe then boldly sallied forth. Plainton stood on one of the seats and watched him through the window. First of all he took possession of Mrs. Chine and marched her over to Miss Medusa, who was biting her lips and looking ' pins and needles '—to use Steptoe's forcible expression. Then the three walked across the Green towards Miss Corbyn, who, however, retreated before them, not being on speaking terms with

either of the curate's companions, notwithstanding that they were fellow district-visitors.

Plainton now made a rush across the Green, feeling quite elated that he had escaped so easily. But, alas ! 'there's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip.' Just as he was entering the garden-gate Mrs. Sowerby and two of her daughters appeared from the little lane running up by the side of the house, and Plainton's heart sank within him as they approached him, for he saw that Mrs. Sowerby held a formidable note-book in her hand, and evidently meant business.

Happily, at the same moment, Margaret appeared at the door, and exclaimed :

'Luncheon has been waiting ever so long !'

'Oh ! never mind, Mr. Plainton, thank you,' said Mrs. Sowerby, as the curate stood irresolute ; 'another time will do.'

He entered his lodgings, and in a few minutes afterwards saw Steptoe returning alone.

'What a clever fellow he is !' exclaimed Plainton, admiringly.

It was about this time that Plainton's youngest sister Lilian was married. We mention it in connection with this narrative merely as illustrating a peculiar feature in the Vicar's character.

When the day was fixed, Plainton told the Vicar that he would like to be away for one night in order to officiate at home at his sister's wedding.

The Vicar carefully looked in the Almanack at the day named, and observed :

'Eh—eh—that day is appointed for our school committee ; nothing must interfere with that. It is invariable, and cannot possibly be postponed. Perhaps you will be good enough to see if the day of the wedding can be altered so that you may attend the school committee.'

Plainton was rather surprised at the sudden importance attached to his being present at the school committee, seeing that the Vicar never allowed him to give an opinion when he was there ; and he also marvelled at the imperative necessity which appeared to have

arisen that the members should certainly meet on that particular day.

He was the more astounded because he remembered that the last committee was transferred from Tuesday to Wednesday, in order that the Vicar might go up to town on the first-mentioned day to get his hair cut; and on other occasions it had been altered to suit his whim and convenience.

On inquiry, Plainton found that the wedding could not be altered, and the Vicar, by his odd capriciousness in the matter, did not add to his reputation for courtesy or gentlemanly feeling. Oddly enough, as it happened, that very meeting which Hatter had stated could under no circumstances be held at any other time, was after all postponed a couple of days because he wished to see Professor Wolff about a corn which had appeared on his little toe, and had appointed for the purpose that very day set aside for the committee, and declared to be absolutely invariable and immovable.



CHAPTER II.

MYSTERIES.

MR. HATTER went away for the winter rather earlier than usual this year. Before he started he gave Plainton very minute and particular instructions on all the matters for which he would be responsible until his return. He especially laid very great stress upon the selection of ladies to work at the Christmas decorations. He dictated to Plainton the names of those who were to be asked, and stated the particular work each was to undertake. But Miss Brougham and her sister and Miss Monmouth were not on any account whatever to be allowed to have anything to do with the affair.

As these three ladies had for many years past undertaken the superintendence of all the church decorations, this particular exclusion was intended to be, as Hatter said, a punishment for their obstinacy, wilfulness, and mutinous conduct as exhibited towards their Vicar last Easter.

The following letter may interest our readers :

‘ Hôtel de Turin, Mentone,

‘ Dec. 29, 18—.

‘ MY DEAR PLAINTON,

‘ I am very much concerned to hear that you have been so unwell. Pray do not overwork yourself, and as soon as possible take a complete rest and thorough change. Go right away to some bracing sea-side town; and enjoy yourself for two if not three days—that is, if you think Steptoe can be trusted during your absence not to get into a muddle. Do not let money stand in the way, as I wish to pay the expense of the journey as a new-year’s gift.

‘ Please take out a license for “ one dog ” as soon as the new year begins.

‘ I hear with regret that there are so many of our old people on the sick-list. It is surprising they should cling to life as they do. Be careful not to give them more port wine than the relief committee compel you, as it will only help to keep them back from their eternal reward, and will burden our funds.

‘ I do not think old Mrs. Springett had better have any more wine. She is too feeble to distinguish the taste of it. You might send her a little oatmeal, a pint of water coloured with Spanish liquorice, and a small quantity of Condyl’s Disinfecting Fluid.

‘ I am afraid we shall have a severe winter. Soup-kitchens are demoralising, so are meat-tickets. If there are any really starving cases, to prevent the scandal of a “ death by starvation ” paragraph in the newspaper, you might give them a little gruel, which will do them no harm and will not cost much.

‘ I wish to show my appreciation of your devoted, faithful, and fruitful labours by

making you a new-year's present. Say what you would like : a new coat, or a pair of boots and a hat ; or perhaps you would prefer the two days by the seaside as at first proposed.

‘ I have no doubt that you have been providentially sent to Pollington, as being eminently fitted to minister to the peculiar wants of the Vicar and his people, with whom you have a grand opportunity of glorifying God and edifying the Church.

‘ Vivas, valeas, et apostolicus fias. Amen, amen ! Don't forget the dog.

‘ Ever yours,

‘ ENOCH HATTER.’

The Vicar's private affairs, pecuniary and literary, required at this time a great deal of care and thought. Plainton was constantly receiving long letters from Hatter, enclosing minute instructions to be followed out, and troublesome commissions to be executed. Fully one-half of his time was taken up in this wearisome work. The following is a

copy of the instructions enclosed in the above letter :

‘ MEM. :

‘ 1. Johnson has made mistake in amount sent in for pew-rents. Chubbs owe *five* guineas instead of *three*. Snobbie has not paid at all. Get these amounts corrected.

‘ 2. Pay Nipston (Tonford) £4 2s. 8d. You ought to get 5 p.c. discount. Also Smith’s bill (Wellington Street, Strand,) £2 17s. 6d.

‘ 3. Get patterns of lectern, and show churchwardens. Send me their opinions. It is not worth while to pay any attention to what Thornycroft says.

‘ 4. Examine and initial housekeeper’s book, and settle account.

‘ 5. Pay Humm £2 and take receipt.

‘ 6. Call on Barstead on quarter-day and receive rent, £52 10s., giving receipt. Call each day till it is settled.

‘ 7. Get enclosed prescription made up at Denny’s (Oxford Street), and send on here.

‘ 8. Write Marsden, and say I am sorry not to be able to give him decisive answer till my return.

‘9. Write Thomas that his letter will receive due consideration.

‘10. The following is from Spenser’s “Shepherd’s Calendar :”

“The blossom which my branch of youth did bear,
With breathed sighs is blown away and blasted.”

I want the verse completed. You can see copy in British Museum if you have not one of your own.

‘11. Get me exact date of first publication of *The Weekly Newes* some time in 1662.

‘12. See if British Museum has copy of John Davis’s “The World’s Hydrographical Description” (temp. 1595). Make exact copy of title-page.

‘13. Find me complete list of Charles Gildon’s works, author of “Complete Art of Poetry.”

‘14. Ask Forester (Oxford Street) if he has Conyers Middleton’s “Christianity as Old as the Creation.” If not, try Kempton (Long Acre), and Eastwood (Holborn). Get it if possible. I will write again when I hear result.

‘ P.S.—Take care of your health. Avoid any suggestions made by Mrs. Thornycroft. Snub her if necessary.

‘ E. H.’

During the Advent and Lenten seasons the curate had extra services at church, and held after-meetings in the schoolroom, which were very largely attended.

He also made a special effort with the Mission service held in Bott’s Lane, and managed to get together a good many of the poorest class. Several of the district visitors energetically aided him in this useful work, especially Mrs. Langley and her indefatigable daughters.

It happened on one Sunday evening that the curate had been preaching from St. Mark viii. 36, ‘ What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul ?’

He spoke of all the world has to offer being comprised in these three things : wealth, honour, pleasure. He showed that

these three objects when put before us as the chief end of existence really add to our misery even in this life by increasing our anxieties, destroying our peace, or deepening our disappointment. They do not really satisfy, even when viewed with regard to this world only. Much less would any thinking man choose them, if to gain them he must lose himself.

The latter part of his sermon was taken up with the consideration of the reasons why men so commonly choose their portion in this world rather than in that to come ; and concluded with an earnest entreaty to his hearers calmly to weigh his words, and wisely to choose the higher and abiding life.

Whilst he was urging this topic upon an attentive congregation, his eye caught that of Fortescue, whom he suddenly discovered sitting at the back of the north transept.

Plainton had not seen him before in the service, and supposed that he must have come in just before the sermon began. He

left whilst the curate was giving the benediction.

Plainton looked up and down the road when he came out of church, but saw no more of him. What could he want in Pollington? The curate called at Dargal Lodge in the week, but as none of the inmates made any reference to Fortescue, Plainton felt sure he had not been seen by them.

A few days afterwards Plainton went to fetch Margaret home from the Manor House, when she informed him as they were coming out that she had been watched by the man whom he had pursued some time back.

It was agreed that both should keep a sharp look-out as they went home, and that if he should show himself again, Plainton should endeavour to capture him, whilst Margaret followed on at a moderate pace.

They arrived at their lodgings without seeing him, when Plainton proposed that they should not go in, but continue their walk along the Plashley Road. They did so, and when they had gone about half a mile, they

suddenly turned into a cross lane, and waited close to the hedge under the shadow of a tree.

After a little while they heard footsteps coming up the main road. They listened breathlessly. The sounds came nearer and nearer, and presently a man passed within a few yards of them. Plainton was not sure at the moment if he were the same man he had before observed, but Margaret was positive. The curate took another quick survey of him and recognised the bearing of his former fugitive, though now he was dressed in a monkey-jacket, and had a close cap tied under his chin, besides being muffled up round the neck.

The man had not observed them. He proceeded up the road a few steps somewhat cautiously, as if he was expecting some one, and then turned back towards the lane where the curate and his sister were concealed. Plainton immediately advanced openly towards him.

The latter gave a start and made a sudden

turn as if he would flee, but Plainton was too quick for him this time, for, throwing himself upon him, he tripped him up on the path.

‘Now, you rascal!’ he exclaimed, holding him by the throat, whilst he knelt upon his chest; ‘I mean to know who you are and what you want. Who has sent you to dog my steps all these months?’

The man wriggled and made an effort to speak, but the curate’s knuckles nearly choked him, and he could only make a gurgling sound in his throat.

Plainton loosened his hold slightly, and to his intense surprise heard the well-known voice of Elijah Humm, articulating with difficulty, owing to the pressure of the curate’s knee on his chest, and the grasp of his hand on his neckcloth.

‘Oh! please, Mr. Plainton, not quite so hard, sir, please, sir!’

The curate was so astounded that he started back a pace, and looked at the prostrate Humm, who took advantage of the pause to rise slowly and pull himself together.

‘You ! is it ?’ exclaimed Plainton ; ‘explain yourself, sir !’

‘Certainly, Mr. Plainton, if you would kindly not be so violent. You have given me a great shock, sir. There’s my poor wife and children——’

‘None of that foolery. Just tell me what you mean by following me about night after night for months, and who set you to do it ?’

‘I am coming to that, sir,’ said he, tremulously ; ‘but my nerves are so shook——’

‘What do you want ?’ thundered Plainton.

‘It’s quite a mistake, sir. It’s all a mistake. I——’

‘What’s a mistake ?’

‘You, Mr. Plainton. You are quite wrong, sir. I have only come to take care of you, Mr. Plainton.’

‘Take care of me, you base hound ! I will have you locked up as soon as I find a policeman.’

‘Excuse me, Mr. Plainton,’ said Humm, whose cowardice was strangely mingled with effrontery and impudence ; ‘but the Vicar

says it is not an indictable offence for a man to walk along a highway road.'

'So the Vicar told you that, did he? Did he tell you at the same time to walk after me?'

'Oh! no, sir!' said Humm, who began to recover his coolness as they got near the village.

'He was only anxious that you should not be garotted when you exposed yourself without protection.'

'So he set you to guard me, did he?' asked Plainton, contemptuously.

'Not exactly that, sir. He heard that you sometimes risked your precious life rather late at night, and this is a very bad, unconverted neighbourhood, you know, Mr. Plainton; and he said it would be kind of any one to see you safe home if any one should happen to be going the same way.'

'And who is the woman you set to take your place when you could not come?'

'Woman, sir? I sent no woman, sir. But I heard Mrs. Chine telling the Vicar

that her Anne had sometimes been fortunate enough to catch a glimpse of you late at night.'

'The Vicar is——' Plainton finished the sentence in thought only.

'I beg your pardon, sir, I did not catch what you said,' said Humm, putting his hand to his ear in an affected attitude of rapt attention.

'I say,' said the curate, angrily, 'that if Mr. Hatter set you or any one else to watch me, he is something worse than I took him for. And I think you are a very nice pair.'

Humm stopped beneath the Vicarage lamp, and, clasping his hands together and looking upwards, observed apparently to the gas-light :

'No ! no ! He cannot mean it. He cannot thus misinterpret Christian kindness.'

Then elevating his voice to the pitch he adopted at the Mission meetings, he quoted in his own peculiar English the following verse of a hymn which was sometimes used at those services, and was frequently in his mouth :

‘ “Just has Hi ham, though toss’d haybout
With many hay conflict, many hay doubt,
Fightings hand fears with-hin, with-hout,
Ho——” ’

‘ Understand this,’ interrupted Plainton,
“that the next time I catch you at these
dirty tricks, you are likely to get a more
effectual ducking than that I gave you some
time ago.’

‘ Me, sir!’ exclaimed Humm, in innocent
surprise. ‘ You mistake, Mr. Plainton; you
never gave me any ducking.’

‘ Did I not chase you over the meadow a
long while ago, and did you not jump into
the canal?’

‘ Oh! dear, no, sir! That must have been
some other unfortunate wayfarer on life’s
tempestuous sea.’

Plainton felt the man was lying, but he
knew his effrontery was equal to any emer-
gency. He said no more, but left him.

As he and Margaret walked away, Humm,
still standing under the lamp with clasped
hands and closed eyes, began singing the
Doxology with a loud voice, and continued

the strain until they were quite out of hearing.

After thinking over the matter, Plainton's first impulse was to write to Mr. Hatter, but on further reflection, he came to the conclusion that it would do no good.

It was not likely that Hatter would admit that he had anything to do with it. If he had been the instigator of Humm's movements, it was clear from what his tool had said that he had taken very good care not to commit himself.

It would be better, Plainton thought, to wait till the Vicar's return, and then he could speak more at length on this and some other matters.

The incident, however, afforded him much matter for reflection. It seemed incredible that to gratify an insatiable and vulgar curiosity, the Vicar should use all this elaborate machinery, and employ so many spies. Was there some other reason besides mere curiosity? Did he expect to find out some secret respecting his curate's life which might

put the latter wholly in his power, and enable him more effectually to gratify his peculiar taste for despotism, and disposition to profit by the weaknesses or necessities of others ?

Plainton tried hard to believe that Mr. Hatter was not so unscrupulous as his acts occasionally seemed to show. He did not think that the man was wholly bad. He was sure that he had his better moments, and felt at times the promptings of a nobler spirit, but his unmatched selfishness continually dragged him down from his better self, and more and more hardened his sleeping conscience.

How mysterious is this earthly life ! There is at first sight some ground for the belief of those who assert that it is governed by an inexorable Fate, and that we cannot, if we would, escape the miseries to which from our birth we seem predestined.

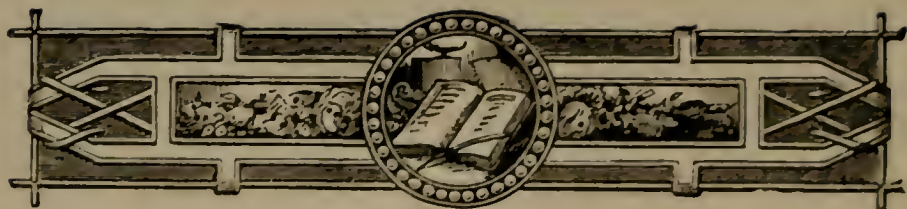
From the day of his ordination Plainton had longed for the companionship in his ministry of one who was holy, learned, large-hearted, and wise ; yet what opposite expe-

riences had been his lot ! Then as these thoughts saddened him, he would console himself with the reflection that it was not for him to choose his path. His Master would place him where He most desired him to be, and if the post were difficult and dangerous, then he might be thankful that he had been chosen out to fight and struggle, and had not been allowed to seek some flowery, idle path with nought to try his courage and skill.

Might he not conquer at last if he were only faithful, courageous, and patient ? And if his ministry were not to be a long one in this world, might it not be that he was being trained and disciplined for higher service in another sphere ?

Life here is, indeed, an insoluble problem. He could not wholly understand it, but he would be content ; he knew his duty, and by the help of God he would do it.

He did not know how soon and how sorely his resolution was to be tried.



CHAPTER III.

‘LATE, LATE, SO LATE!’

PLAINTON had been spending the evening at Dargal Lodge, and as he went out of the gate he caught sight of Parker walking close up by the wall.

‘I wonder what that fellow wants hanging about here at this time of night,’ said Plainton to himself; then, walking home, thought no more about it.

Mona had spent a happy evening. She had been reading with the curate a chapter of St. John’s Gospel, in Greek, and had been playing on the guitar, and singing some of his favourite songs. Soon after ten o’clock she said ‘good-night’ to her mother and Mrs. Eugénie, and retired to her room.

It was situated on the same floor as her mother's, but at the end of a passage. On one side of her was a spare bedroom, and on the other a dressing-room. Her brother slept above. Mona had sat by the fire for some time and read a chapter of a work Plainton had lent her, called 'Self-Renunciation.'

Tired of reading, she shut the book and looked at the 'Ecce Homo' over the head of her bed.

'How hard it is,' she murmured, 'to die to self! If it is not our passions and tempers we wish to gratify, there is at least our plan or scheme of life. We cannot give up our will. *He* alone did it perfectly, yet not without a struggle.'

Then she prayed. Plainton had said that we should try to be unselfish in our prayers; to pray more for the extension of Christ's kingdom than for the gratification of our own personal desires. Thus did Mona pray for the triumph of good and the overthrow of evil, for a blessing on all charitable works, and especially on those carried on in her own parish.

Friends and enemies alike had the benefit of her pleading. Her own simple wants came last.

She rose from her knees and looked out of the window. It was a cloudy night, and the wind was getting up. How dark and mysterious the garden looked !

‘ It seems fitting,’ she soliloquized, ‘ that evil should stalk forth at night and revel in the pitchy darkness.’

Before composing herself to slumber she opened a small case in one of the drawers and took out a photograph, which she gazed at long and earnestly ; then, slowly locking it up sought her couch and slept.

After a time she woke again. Had she slept long ? She thought she had. It must be morning. How high the wind is ! What noise is that ? Is it some one moving, or is it only the wind ? There is a slight noise at the door—it opens—it must be Arthur !

‘ Is that you, Arthur ?’ she asks softly.
Some one enters.

‘ Arthur, is that you ?’

'Hold your row, or I'll put a bullet into you!' mutters a low, gruff voice; at the same moment the figure was beside the bed, and she saw an arm outstretched over her.

'Speak if you dare!' said the voice.

Mona lay looking upward in helpless terror. The man deliberately turned on her the light of a small lantern, and she saw that his face was masked.

'Where's your money and jewellery?'

She pointed to the place where they were kept, and told him where to get her keys. He took all he could find. He next asked where the plate was kept. She told him in her mother's room. The man muttered an oath, and, cautioning her not to make a noise, noiselessly left the room.

Mona thought she heard him descend the stairs, but, as the wind was still gusty, could not be sure. Her courage had now returned. She ran to her brother's room, woke him instantly, and in a few concise sentences told him what had happened.

Arthur took his revolver, which he had

always kept ready since the great robberies of last year, and threw open the window. He saw, or thought he saw, a figure moving by the trees across the lawn. He shouted to the supposed burglar to stop, or he would fire. There was no reply, and he fired. He listened, but heard nothing.

He now sent Mona to wake the domestics, and hastily putting on some clothes, took his lantern and revolver, and proceeded down the garden. On the lawn he found a pistol and a mask. He saw nothing more till he got near the gate at the bottom of the estate. There, lying on the sod, he found the body of a man. He was quite unconscious. He had apparently managed to get thus far after he had been struck on the lawn by Arthur's shot, and then his strength had failed him.

Arthur hastily ran to the next villa and woke up the coachman, who slept over the stables. He knew him very well, and having briefly told him what had happened, sent him for Dr. Jolly, and thence on to the police station.

He returned to the burglar, whom he found still in a semi-conscious condition. Dr. Jolly arrived, and between them the man was got into the house. The bullet, it appeared, had struck him in the back of the neck, and he was evidently in a critical condition.

'I suppose you know whom you have captured?' said the doctor.

'No, indeed. I never saw him before.'

'Look here!'—holding the light to his face.

Arthur looked more carefully, and discovered, to his astonishment, the features of Parker.

We may mention here that this event cut short the man's career of crime. Parker, or Skittles, as he was known to his companions, recovered indeed from the wound, chiefly owing to the skill and careful tending of Dr. Jolly; but being put on his trial and found guilty, and other mysterious robberies having been meanwhile traced to him, he was sentenced to fourteen years' penal servitude.

Mr. Melody was not in England at the

time of the attempted burglary. On his return he made a long stay at the Lodge. He still talked about their going to live in Spain, but appeared to hesitate to make the final arrangements. The matter would, however, have to be settled, he said, one way or the other within the next week or two.

There was a great change in his demeanour. He was moody and silent. He would rise at three or four o'clock in the morning and walk the garden for hours. At times he was excitable, when he would ask incoherent questions and make strange assertions. Mrs. Melody and Mona were much alarmed at these unusual symptoms, but they were unable to trace their source. At first they supposed that it was owing to pecuniary embarrassments, but it did not appear that Fortescue was pressing him. They gleaned, however, that the former had been attacked with fever at Rome, and that he had had a long and dangerous illness, which had left him in an extremely delicate condition.

He would ask Mona to play and sing to

him for hours together; then he would start off and walk the rest of the day without tasting food, and come back dusty, haggard, and exhausted. Occasionally he would drink large quantities of wine or spirits, but this very rarely occurred.

One morning he came early into Mona's room before she was up. He came in softly and did not wake her. She was lying with her arms crossed upon her bosom, and there was a quiet smile playing about her beautiful lips. He stood looking at her intently without moving.

'She sleeps like a child,' he muttered, 'and a child she is in heart.'

Mona opened her eyes, and looked upon her father's face.

'What is it, papa dear?'

'Don't call me dear; I am not fit to be your father. You are too good for me.'

'Do not talk like that, papa.'

'You do not know what a villain I am,' said he, striking his fist on his hand.

'It is no business of mine, even if it be

true. If you have done wrong, it is against God, and He will forgive you if you ask.'

'I cannot ask.'

'Try, papa dear.'

He shook his head, and his eye glanced round her neat, pretty room.

'What is that picture over your head?'

'It is an "Ecce Homo;" you have seen it many times before.'

'Yes; what does it mean?'

'It represents our Saviour as He was brought out to the people by Pilate crowned with thorns.'

'Do you believe in all that fanciful story?'

'I could not live without it.'

'Strange it is, that the story of a man who died so long ago should still be able to influence so deeply the lives of those who accept it as true, and who never even saw the man.'

'He did die, papa, but He still lives.'

'Ah! if I could take that in!' Then, striding across her room once or twice, he muttered to himself: 'Was dead, and is alive again,' words which were a distant echo of

his childhood's teachings awakened by Mona's remark. He did not know clearly, but had a dim consciousness of the deep truth which connected the two stories—the story of the physical death and resurrection of the Lord of Life, and that of the spiritual death and resurrection of erring man as crystallised in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

He then abruptly left Mona's room, and was not seen again all day.

As day after day passed by he seemed to get no calmer. He neglected his personal appearance and remained unshaven, quite contrary to his usual careful habits. He tasted but little food, and wandered about from room to room in a purposeless kind of way. Mrs. Melody was very much frightened at these strange signs, and tried all kinds of expedients to divert her husband from the one thought, whatever it was, which appeared to be preying on his mind.

In one of his conversations with Mona, he said :

‘ I saw an awful thing happen in Italy. A

man who was spending the evening with me got up from table, and pulling out a pistol, shot himself through the head.'

'How dreadful, papa !'

'I fear I was the cause of it. He was a young man, too, and had a young and beautiful wife.'

'Oh ! I trust his death was not through you.'

'We had been playing for three nights together, and he had lost heavily each night.'

'Do not say so, papa dear !' said Mona, much distressed.

'It is quite true. He fell at my feet dead, and his wife stood over his body and cursed me and mine. The curse will stick.'

He spoke this in a kind of terror, and in a tone of the deepest conviction.

'Papa, it is wrong to suppose that words uttered by one in a frenzy could harm you. Make what reparation you can, and ask God's forgiveness for Christ's sake, and you will find peace.'

'Idle tales, my child. There is no peace for me. I have the unquenchable fire and the undying worm within me,'—striking his breast passionately.

'This is a temptation to despair coming from the evil one,' rejoined Mona, earnestly and tearfully.

'Do not listen to him, papa dear. He is tempting you as he tempted Judas. Oh! pray to God!'

'I cannot pray, child. Every word would be a witness against myself. A thousand accusing shapes would hang on every sentence. I should be the sport, as I have been the dupe, of hell,—if there be a hell outside a man's own heart.'

'Oh! papa dear, do not think of that dread place, but think of heaven, and God, and a merciful Christ. If there had been no sin, there would have been no Saviour.'

He came again to Mona's room that night whilst she was reading.

'Do not let me interrupt you, but instead of reading to yourself read aloud.'

Mona gladly complied. She read to him the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

The wonderful simplicity and pathetic beauty of the touching story, associated as it was with his earliest and purest memories—the memory of a fond mother, of a happy home, of a quiet, unsullied, childlike life—bowed the troubled heart of the jaded man of the world, who had sat down so long with the swine, fed upon their husks, and was now suffering the sharp pangs of unsatisfied hunger.

Mona with difficulty commanded herself, yet, exerting her strong will, managed to finish the parable with comparative calmness, whilst her father sat with his face buried in the side of her bed, weeping bitterly.

Closing the book, she said softly, putting her arm round his neck :

‘Papa dear, let us pray.’

Kneeling down by his side, the stainless daughter of the sin-stained man offered up a quiet, simple, but fervent prayer, founding her petitions on the story she had just read.

She concluded with the Lord's Prayer, in which her father audibly joined.

When she rose from her knees he passionately clasped her to his breast, and, to use the strong phrase of the Psalmist, 'roared for the very disquietness of his heart.'

When he had grown calmer he bid her an affectionate 'Good-night,' and left her.

Mona had informed Plainton of her father's condition, and had inquired if he thought it advisable that she should ask her father to see him, but the curate said she had better not at present. If her father expressed a wish to see him, he would gladly come, but otherwise a formal visit from him might do more harm than good.

For a few days after the incident above related, Mr. Melody seemed to grow more calm, and to become for a time even cheerful. But it did not last long. His desponding mood returned one night when there was a somewhat violent thunderstorm.

'The devil has got the upper hand,' he

remarked, and continued pacing his room till early morning.

On a clear, bright morning a little after daybreak, Mr. Melody came into his daughter's room more carefully dressed than she had seen him since his return. He seemed quite cheerful again.

‘I am going for a row before breakfast, Mona. I told Styles to have the skiff round as soon as it was light. Good-bye!’

‘Good-bye, papa dear. You will be back to breakfast?’

‘Oh yes.’

He went to the door, then returned and kissed her.

‘God bless you, my child. Good-bye!’

‘Good-bye! Don’t be late.’

‘Oh no!’ and he shut the door. As he walked across the garden he muttered, absently, to himself:

“Late, late, so late! Ye cannot enter now.

Too late—too late.”’

An hour passed away, and Mona walked to the garden-gate to look out for Mr. Melody,

but he was not to be seen. She went to the conservatory and cut some roses for him, and returned to the gate. He was not in sight.

Going back to the breakfast-room she said to her mother,

'I wonder papa does not come; he said he would not be late!'

'I am afraid it is of no use to wait any longer,' returned Mrs. Melody; 'he must have altered his mind and have gone farther.'

Another hour passed, and he did not return. Presently young Styles came to know if Mr. Melody had come back.

'No!' exclaimed Mrs. Melody, in alarm; 'why do you ask?'

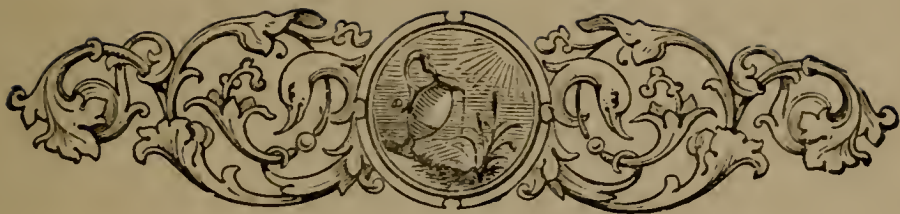
'I am afraid, ma'am, there has been an accident. The skiff was found a little while ago against the weir, upside down. But he might have got out to walk, and let the boat drift away.'

This was not very likely, but Mrs. Melody and Mona clung to it, remembering Mr. Melody's eccentric ways of late.

Meanwhile, some of the waterside men were

sent to search for him above the lock, through which he had passed with the flood-tide.

Their mission proved only too successful. Before the sun had set his body was brought home.



CHAPTER IV.

THE MISSIONARY LABOURS OF MR. HUMM.

THE Vicar had returned at the end of February. He was received with the usual cordiality which ever marked the delight of his parishioners at the coming back of their beloved Vicar—wherever he was seen he was avoided. He always had plenty of room in the street when he walked out, for most people crossed the road rather than encounter him, and turned up any lane or walked a long way round in order to postpone the too exquisite pleasure of shaking hands with him.

Children have a strange, instinctive liking for some people, and an equally strong aversion from others. Whenever they met Hatter,

if they did not run away, they looked up at him with, a kind of fascinated terror till he was gone by.

The Broughams, however, did not attempt to avoid him. They rather put themselves in his way, and when they did happen to meet him face to face, gave him the cut direct.

‘Eh—eh,’ said the Vicar one morning to Plainton—‘the Broughams and Miss Monmouth are very angry about the arrangements made for the decorations at Christmas.’

‘Yes, there was a great uproar about it at the time.’

‘Eh—eh—what did you tell them?’

‘I told them their names were not included in the list you gave me. I mentioned those who were, and what you said each was to do.’

‘Did I give you a written list?’

‘No, you told me in the vestry, and I made notes in my pocket-book at the same time.’

‘Eh—eh—when I wrote to you from Mentone about it, did I mention any names?’

Plainton thought this was a strange ques-

tion ; he did not understand its motive until much later on.

He replied :

‘ No, it was not necessary. You had already spoken twice of the matter, giving me the name of each person who was to act, and those of the three who were specially excluded.’

‘ Exactly,’ said the Vicar, in a tone of evident relief ; ‘ I do not see why they should complain. They shall know I am Vicar.’

But Hatter was evidently very sore at the reception given him. He liked to indulge his eccentricities of temper, but was extremely uncomfortable when he found that anybody resented them.

For several Sundays after his return the Vicar was not able to go out to the evening service because of his tender lungs. On one of these nights when Plainton had been preaching rather longer than usual, as he was going out of the church door he was stopped by Mrs. Humm in a state of great agitation. She was carrying her baby in her arms. Plainton took her on one side and heard her

story, the substance of which was as follows :

‘ For a long time I have suspected my husband, Mr. Plainton, because of his irregular habits and the way he treats me at home. To-night, when he went out I followed him. He met Mr. Hatter’s cook up the Molton Road, and whilst he was walking with her with his arm round her waist, I went up to him and asked him if that was what he meant by conversion, when he swore at me, knocked me down and kicked me.

‘ He spends most of his evenings at the Vicarage, and never comes home till quite late, mostly the worst for liquor, as he goes very often to the public-house on his way back. When I taxed him with spending all his nights there, he said he was trying to convert the servants, who were all very worldly. I asked him why he went to the public-house afterwards, and he said it was necessary to keep his brain up after contending with such hardened sinners as they were at the Vicarage.

‘ He scarcely ever gives me any money, and

I and my five children have not a bit of bread in the house.'

She spoke of several acts of violence on the part of her husband, and said he had threatened to kill her if she followed him.

Plainton quieted her as well as he could and told her to go home, while he went to the Vicarage and told Mr. Hatter what he had heard. The Vicar was really grateful for this. It was agreed that nothing should be said on the matter to any one, as Mr. Hatter would take such steps as the case demanded. But during the week half Pollington knew the story from Mrs. Humm's own lips.

The Vicar found it necessary to get rid of his too active missionary, and Humm was obliged to seek a situation elsewhere. After leaving Pollington he acted for some time as conductor of a tram-van. No doubt his energy and quickness would have enabled him to secure a permanent appointment in this capacity, but, unfortunately for his worldly prospects, he took to distributing to his passengers leaflets, on which were printed

in prominent type such startling assertions as the following :

‘ You are a Doomed SINNER !’

‘ Repent !’

‘ Where are you Going To-NIGHT ? Perhaps to Heaven, or to Hell ! Are You Ready ?’

‘ He that Believeth not, shall be DAMNED !’

Several of the regular passengers objected to these observations, and remonstrated with Humm, who, however, told them that they did not know what was good for them, and continued to offer his leaflets. At last the directors, in order to put a stop to the continual complaints of his violent zeal, got rid of him.

His wife continued to live at Pollington, depending chiefly on charity. Occasionally her husband sent her a few shillings, and then would take no notice of her for several weeks. At last he ceased to write at all to her. She went up to town, and after a long search, found him out. She discovered his lodgings one night about nine o’clock. Hav-

ing been let in by the landlady, she rushed into his sitting-room, where she found him comfortably discussing a hot beef-steak and boiled potatoes.

‘Oh! Elijah! how could you leave me like this!’ exclaimed his weeping wife.

Elijah looked somewhat astonished at this unexpected apparition of the beloved partner of his bosom. Feeling, no doubt, that it was incumbent on him to give her a warm reception, he suddenly rose, took up the dish of potatoes, and threw them at her. His wife beat a hasty retreat, and he affectionately followed with the intention of giving her further substantial proofs of his marital regard; she, however, escaped him.

On her return to Pollington she went into the union, and the district officer then summoned her husband before Messrs. Broadbeam and Thornycroft for deserting his wife. These gentlemen sentenced him to two months’ imprisonment, much to his surprise, and to the extreme indignation of Mr. Hatter, who, with the unprejudiced bene-

volence which distinguished him, always regarded Elijah Humm as a brother.

Plainton's health did not recover its tone after the return of the Vicar. The long and heavy strain of mental labour, the constant drain upon his nervous power in making due preparation for the pulpit, and in preaching to a large and intelligent congregation, together with the other many and onerous duties involved in his position, kept him in a low and feeble condition of health. A month's complete rest would have set him up again, but he had never enjoyed a thorough rest since he had come into the place.

People remarked to the Vicar that the curate did not seem to be very well, to which Mr. Hatter invariably replied that he wanted a little medicine, owing to the trying weather, and that the present of a box of pills, or of a bottle of cod-liver oil, would no doubt prove acceptable.

Plainton felt that he could not go on much longer in his present unsatisfactory condition, and after long consideration wrote to the

Vicar to this effect, sending in his resignation at the same time.

Mr. Hatter adopted his old tactics ; invited the curate to luncheon, expressed his deep commiseration and sorrow, and ended with a request that he would postpone his resignation for a little while.

‘ Eh—eh—the fact is, I have been thinking most seriously of getting you away to a lighter charge. A friend of mine wants a man to take a living in Scotland. The duty is light, the air bracing, and the scenery delightful, but I do not think it would be fair to the people for the man to use the living simply as a recreation-ground, say for six months or a year. If you will promise to take it for not less than six or seven years I shall be happy to recommend you.’

As Plainton did not answer immediately, Mr. Hatter was fearful he meant to accept it even on those wild terms ; he therefore hastened to add :

‘ After all, I think you had better not go. It is not fair to take six or seven years

out of a valuable life like yours. No, no ; let us wait a week or two longer, and then I think I can do something infinitely better for you.'

As soon as Plainton was gone the Vicar said to his wife :

' My dear, I think Plainton will not hold out much longer, and it is now a race whether I can get away to Cunningstone before he completely breaks up.'

' It is very tiresome. Dr. Cartwright is so dilatory too, and does not seem to enter into your views at all.'

' No ; I must increase the offer, and see if I cannot get him to come to terms.'

' Any way, he will go before the year is out.'

' Yes, but Plainton will be down long before that, and I cannot get another man to do his work without a large increase of stipend. The expense in making the change would be considerable.'

' I suppose it would. It is very tiresome.'

‘ I think we might send Plainton a couple of boxes of blue pills.’

‘ Very well.’

‘ And you might write him at the same time a little complimentary note.’

‘ I will. Perhaps you can spare this week’s *Scrutator* as well ?’

‘ Eh—no. I shall want that ; but here is an old number of the *Pall Mall*, with only a leaf or two missing. Let him have it, with my kindest regards.’

‘ And he might have this catalogue of Smith’s surplus and defaced copies of books, in case he should like to purchase any.’

‘ A capital idea ! as we have quite done with it. It would be extremely awkward if he should die before I can get away.’

‘ In some degree, but you could easily get temporary help.’

‘ But that is not the only objection. There would be a public funeral ; his diabolical sister, who is equal to anything, would be sure to say that I hastened his untimely end, and Pollington would be hotter than it has been

yet,' said the Vicar, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

'It is a wicked, abominable, ungrateful parish,' rejoined his indignant spouse.

'It is, my dear,' said the Vicar, resignedly; 'but those who lead the highest life must expect persecution.'

Here Hatter smiled benignly at his wife, who winked her left eye, and gave vent to a short, amused grunt.

It now being feeding-time, the philanthropic pair hastened to their trenchers, where they did excellent service in a marvellously short period.



CHAPTER V.

AN UNSOLVED PROBLEM.

AFTER the sad death of Mr. Melody, Plain-ton called frequently at the Lodge and did his best to comfort the family.

Mrs. Melody was inconsolable.

‘I might have known it would happen, for I heard the banshee.’

‘Oh ! mamma, pray do not talk so. It is not right.’

‘It is quite true.’

And nothing would persuade her from this belief. She was like a good many more half-religious people, who make up for their want of devotion by excess of superstition.

‘Besides, my dear, you must remember,’ she

continued, with a touch of almost ludicrous pride, 'that your poor papa was of a good old Irish family, not one of which was ever known to die without the banshee giving due notice. I do not think your dear papa would be treated differently from the rest.'

Poor Mona looked so sadly beautiful in her mourning attire that Plainton could scarce contain his emotion when he first saw her thus habited.

The jury on the inquest returned a verdict of 'accidental death,' so that the curate was able to read the Burial service over the body. Nevertheless, there were several persons who maintained that the deceased committed suicide owing to the embarrassed state of his property.

Mona felt her father's death very keenly, but was much less demonstrative about it than her mother.

She fell a good deal into her old abstracted way, and the curate often came upon her in a profound reverie.

One day she abruptly asked him :

‘Do you think that at death the state of the individual is fixed unalterably, eternally?’

‘It is a very difficult question, Mona. If I give you my own opinion I should say, no. The Bible does not clearly decide the matter one way or the other, yet gives some few indications of a possible progress towards and in goodness.’

‘As regards those who are already safe, you mean?’

‘No ; I mean that repentance beyond the grave is possible. In fact the Bible says as much, in one instance. We are told by St. Peter, that our Lord at His death went and preached to the souls in prison, whose bodies perished at the Flood. Unless it was to give them another chance of repentance one does not see the use of His preaching. He would hardly do it in order to increase their misery, as some amiable divines maintain.’

‘That is quite a new light,’ said Mona, much interested.

‘What was done for those who died im-

penitent then, may be done for those who have died impenitent since.'

'Yet it seems strange that on so momentous a question we should not have had some authoritative declaration from our Lord.'

'There are no doubt many good reasons why our Lord should have been so silent as regards the unseen world, whose secrets were all open to His gaze. Nevertheless, He gives some hints that there are repentance and progress beyond the grave.'

'I should like to know them.'

'Well, there is His statement in the Sermon on the Mount, in speaking of reconciliation with an adversary. He says that if we are unreconciled and cast into prison, referring to the intermediate state, we shall not come out, till we have paid the uttermost farthing—'

'That is,' interrupted Mona, 'never come out, as we could never pay it.'

'No, I do not think that follows, though it is the popular interpretation of the passage, but, as it seems to me, a very disingenuous one. The natural and simple meaning of our

Lord's words appears to be, that there would be punishment, and a very severe one, but remedial and disciplinary, so that the penalty would at last be paid, having served its beneficent purpose, and the offender would be released.'

'It certainly sounds more acceptable to one's notions of justice and mercy.'

'Similarly I should interpret the statement in the parable of the Unmerciful Servant, that he was delivered to the tormentors till he should pay all that was due to his master.'

'But does not that interpretation overthrow the great lesson intended to be taught by the parable ?'

'Not if we regard the punishment as remedial, in order to bring the offender to a right frame of mind. In the same way we punish a child, not because it pleases us to inflict pain, but to teach him, when loving words fail to do so, that wrong-doing will certainly bring retribution on the wrong-doer.'

'Yes, I see that.'

'Take again the parable of the Rich Man

and Lazarus. See what great progress the former made when he was released from the temptations of the flesh. He wakes up to a sense of his responsibility. He begins to feel a generous regard for his brethren. Notwithstanding his fearful torments, which probably were more mental than physical, seeing that he was in a disembodied state, he can think of others who still have a chance of escape, and he would fain send a missionary to preach to them. That rich man in Hades—for you will see by the Greek that it is not Gehenna, the place of final torment, in which he suffers—is a far better Christian than many I know in Pollington, who yet have a very complacent opinion of their own merits.'

'Do you hold, then, that all men will be ultimately saved?'

'That is a question no one can answer. There are strong passages in Scripture both for and against. I do not think that man with his present limited knowledge can reconcile them. I know that God would have all men to be saved, for the Bible says so ; but He has also

given to man the wonderful gift of a will absolutely free. What shall be the final resultant in eternity, of the exercise of these two forces—one of which is not constant—acting on the soul or spirit of man, I cannot say. He alone knows, who “can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not.”

‘But if a soul in torment,’ he continued, ‘were smitten with repentance and desired to serve God, I cannot but imagine, as the Bible says nothing to the contrary, that it would be possible to Infinite Power and Infinite Love, as well as conformable to Infinite Justice, to find a place for the manifestation of the fruits of the repentance of such an unhappy being. Unhappy, I say, in having missed the joy and rewards of the first resurrection ; but happier far than those miserable beings whose wills shall still be opposed to the Divine Will, and who may continue to love the tyrannical sway of the Evil One, rather than the beneficent rule of the Father in Heaven who made them.’

Plainton had been walking with her up

and down the path leading to the old summer-house whilst he answered her questions. He had been weighing his words carefully, and trying to speak with an exact regard to what might be urged for or against the view he was propounding. In doing this, he had separated his thoughts from all reference to any individual case, and he forgot for the moment that Mona's interest in these difficult and unsolved problems was the result of her father's sudden death.

A violent sob from his companion caused him to look round. He saw that Mona was greatly agitated, and was vainly striving to master her unwonted emotion. He led her into the summer-house, and sat down by her side. It may sound strange, but it is nevertheless true, that the sorrow-stricken girl had shed no tears since her father's death. Now at last she gave vent to her pent-up grief. Leaning her head against Plinton's shoulder she wept freely. He took her tenderly in his arms, as he would a little child, and held her to his breast till she was soothed and comforted.

Plainton was, after all, her most intimate and best loved friend. She dearly loved her mother indeed, but Mrs. Melody had never really understood her daughter's character, and had, in fact, found it too troublesome and difficult a task to thread the labyrinth of Mona's heart. Mrs. Eugénie had more of her confidence, but not the whole. There were times, as that lady herself admitted to Mrs. Melody, when she could not approach Mona, and there were subjects upon which she would not suffer her to say a word. Ductile as she generally was in that experienced woman's hands, she sometimes astonished even her by her strange moods of seeming coldness, reserve, and haughtiness.

Plainton alone held the key which could unlock all the wards of her great and noble heart. She had allowed him to explore all its depths, and to sound its most secret recesses. He alone had discovered and appreciated the powers of her mind ; he alone had revealed to her consciousness what she was capable of doing, and shown what might be

accomplished by her for the benefit of others. He alone had approached her with success on her religious and devotional side. His searching analysis had made her see what she really believed, and what she merely thought she held. He had made her know the grounds of her faith, and had opened her eyes to the immensity of the unknown which lay beyond all that was revealed. He alone had given her an interest in life, and made her feel how beautiful, how glorious, how divine is that highest life which was possible to her, but to which she had not yet attained.

When she was quite calm again, she still nestled her head in the resting-place Plinton had found for it. She had not before known such deep, such complete repose. Wearied with sleepless nights of pain and tearless grief; haunted by horrible fears of her father's destiny in the other world; exhausted by vain efforts to comfort her afflicted mother; troubled in some degree as to their future in this life; her aching, lacerated heart was

now anointed with a precious and healing balm.

Plainton still silently held her to his breast, and as the sun's bright light began to fade she still rested there, and softly slept away her sorrow.

After a while she opened her eyes, and releasing herself, stood up by his side. Placing her hand on his shoulder she looked down earnestly into his face, and said :

‘ How much I owe you !’

‘ It is very little I have been able to do, Mona. It is in bereavement especially that one feels so utterly helpless to aid another.’

‘ Oh ! but you have helped me greatly, and given me so much hope with regard to poor papa.’

‘ I am glad to hear that.’

‘ I could not bear to think,’ she said, shuddering, ‘ that through all eternity he would be enduring untold agony ; would perhaps be crying out for ages, “ O God ! let me serve Thee !” and He, upon whom he vainly called, would look down with stony,

immovable face, and say : “ No ! you are too late ! You are doomed through all eternity to inconceivable torment. Your repentance is just a few minutes too late. It is now in vain. I want neither your service nor your love ! ” ’

As with sudden excitement Mona spoke these words, she seemed to throw herself completely into the awful scene she had created, and upon which her vivid imagination had evidently long dwelt—a lost soul entreating for mercy from an Omnipotent and inexorable Power. She stretched out one hand towards Heaven, and firmly clenched the other as it hung by her side. Her eyes flashed, her bosom heaved, her lips quivered, her cheeks flushed and again grew pale, till she looked the very personification of indignant Love, pleading in mourning weeds against pitiless, resistless Law.

‘ Pray, Mona, do not conjure up such a dreadful picture. ’

‘ I will not again. But it has haunted me for weeks past. I have seen the flame un-

quenchable in my dreams ; I have beheld the undying worm, ravaging its victim, yet not taking his life, leaving him still a sentient, reasoning being with all his powers intact, only heightened and intensified by his separation from a body of clay.'

' Cease, Mona, cease. It is but a feverish dream. Do not count it a reality.'

' I will not again.'

' Let us be content to leave this mystery in the hands of infinite Love. Surely we know enough of God's love in this life to be able to trust Him in that which is to come.'

' Yes, I think so. We must go in now.'



CHAPTER VI.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

A FORTNIGHT had elapsed without Plainton being able to call at Dargal Lodge. When at length he went he found Mona suffering from an attack of her old complaint. The Spring, so bright and joyous, yet so treacherous, generally tried her.

He called again in a day or two ; she was rather worse, and suffering a great deal of pain. He called in the following week, and found her very ill indeed with rheumatic fever. She asked to see him. He went up into her room, and noticed that her suffering had caused a considerable change in her face.

She smiled faintly as she looked at him with

her full, sad eyes. He took her hand as he sat by her bed-side, and wiped away the drops of pain from her pure, noble brow. He read and prayed with her. Mrs. Melody and Mrs. Eugénie were present. The latter never left her, but the mother's anxiety and terror prevented her from being so useful as she might otherwise have been.

On the following day he administered to her the Holy Communion.

Poor Plainton was extremely alarmed at her critical condition. Was it possible that she would not recover? He put away the awful thought.

Day after day he continued to call and bring her flowers, and Mona always asked for him as soon as he came.

Dr. Jolly was there twice a day, and being a good Christian as well as a skilful practitioner, his presence was always acceptable. In his quiet, practical way, he often soothed the perturbed spirit as well as relieved physical pain. He kept hope alive in the hearts of all, and in answer to the most pressing

inquiries would not admit but that Mona might yet pull through.

But it soon became evident that in all probability she was really about to leave them.

Plainton could not realise it.

What ! Mona !—so young, so beautiful, so clever, so wise, so good, so loving—must she indeed go away ? He had never seen her equal—must he lose her so soon ? Must he never more press that hand, nor hear that sweet, melodious voice, nor see affection beaming forth from her soft, expressive eye ? It could not be—he would not think of it. The cup of happiness had but now reached his lips ; was it to be so rudely dashed away ?

He left the Lodge late one night with these thoughts agitating his sorrowful heart. As soon as he got home he retired to his room. He had not been there long when Mrs. Evans came to tell him that a gentleman wished to see him.

‘ What is his name ? ’

‘ He would not give it, sir. He said he wanted to see you very particularly, if you would kindly come down for a few minutes.’

Plainton went down into the sitting-room, and stopped on the threshold as his eye caught the features of Fortescue, who was standing by the table. As the curate stood silently looking at him, he observed that he appeared very worn, pale, and thin.

‘If I can speak to you for a short time, Mr. Plainton, I shall not keep you long.’

Plainton entered the room and shut the door.

His visitor said in a low, constrained voice :

‘I am sorry to trouble you, but I want to know if you will give me your help in some private affairs?’

The curate still looked surprised and perplexed.

Fortescue’s face flushed a little as he said :

‘I have been very ill since our last unfortunate meeting—or fortunate, perhaps I ought to say—at Dargal Lodge. I nearly died in Rome.’

Plainton had now recovered himself.

‘Pray sit down, Mr. Fortescue. I shall be pleased if I can be of any use to you. I heard of your illness.’

‘I am still very weak. I came to the church a few Sundays ago and heard you preach.’

‘I saw you.’

‘I have been taking new views of things for some time past. I am not the same man that I was, thank God!’

‘I am glad to hear that,’ said the curate, cordially.

‘It began in my illness, when I saw hell opened at my feet, and heaven far out of my reach. I went through all the feelings you described in your sermon, and saw that this world could not satisfy me. It could not give me peace. I vowed if I recovered to lead a new life. I came to Pollington in that mood on the Sunday night you preached, and almost unconsciously entered the church. Almost every word you spoke was the echo of my own thoughts during my illness.’

‘I am rejoiced to find for once that the vows made in illness still hold good now you have recovered. It is not generally the case, unfortunately,’ said the curate, sadly.

‘ I wish to give you some proof of it.’

Thereupon he took out of his pocket a bundle of papers. Removing the fastening. he handed them to Plainton.

‘ Be good enough to look at those.’

Plainton hastily glanced through them.

‘ They appear to relate to money transactions between you and Mr. Melody, and these at the bottom are the mortgage deeds of some Irish property.’

‘ Yes, these documents give me the command of almost the whole of Mr. Melody’s property. Will you have the kindness to destroy them ?’

Plainton hesitated.

His visitor walked to the fire-place and put one of the papers amidst the dying embers. It flared up, and he then placed the whole of them, one after another, in the flame. Taking out a penknife and cutting the parchments into strips, he destroyed them in turn.

‘ I would I could as easily get rid of the memories connected with them,’ he remarked, as he watched the intermittent flame.

Plainton thought it best not to interrupt the man's thoughts, and the two sat looking into the fire.

Once or twice the curate glanced at his companion's face. He could not but remark the great change which became apparent on a closer inspection of his features. It is true there were the remains of the old lines of stubborn will, fierce passion, and selfish indulgence, but there were besides unmistakable traces of the mental and spiritual struggle through which the man had passed. The whole face was subdued and softened, and there was a prevailing expression of remorse and sorrow. Plainton thought that if he had repented of his past evil deeds, as he did not doubt he had, he had not yet been able to realise the blessedness of forgiveness.

When the last fragment of paper was consumed, he turned to the curate and said :

‘ Mrs. Melody and Mona have now amply sufficient to maintain them in affluence.’

‘ You have done a generous deed.’

‘ Not generous. It is only a small act of

reparation for the great wrongs of the past. I would they could be wholly wiped out and forgotten. But even Divine power is unable to cause that never to have been which has been once done.'

'True, but there remains to us repentance, and such restitution as lies in our power. More cannot be done, nor is it required.'

'No, but the knowledge of the impossibility of wholly undoing a wrong must ever be the criminal's worst punishment, when once his eyes are opened.' As he spake thus sadly he looked again into the dying embers. 'The fire is quenched, and has left behind only worthless ashes.'

'Not wholly worthless, my friend. Even ashes have a force conserved within them, and a mission to perform. They are useful, amongst other things, in preparing certain soils for the reception of seed. And if they do not absolutely bear fruit themselves, they discharge an important function in helping to perfect that which has taken root elsewhere.'

Fortescue continued to look silently at the

ashes, and his companion did not attempt further to interrupt his reverie.

Presently he started up and said :

‘ I have no right to keep you. Yet I have one more favour to ask of you before I return to town.’

‘ I shall be glad to serve you in any way I can.’

‘ I have heard of Mona’s illness’—here the hardly-recovered invalid with difficulty controlled his emotion. ‘ I want you to give her a message from me,’ he continued, ‘ if you think it well to deliver it. I wish you to ask her to forgive me all the wrongs I have done her and her father. I will do anything to show my sincerity.’

‘ She will not doubt it.’

‘ Is she very ill ?’

‘ I fear so.’

‘ I must now return to town, but I will leave you an address, to which, if you will kindly send any news of the family, I shall be very grateful.’

‘ I will certainly do so.’

‘ I am going abroad for six months, and if I recover, I hope to be of more use in the world than I have been as yet, though I doubt if I can do much.’

‘ I am very glad to hear that you think of making the attempt.’

‘ I may want your advice in that matter. But I will say no more till I have given more thought to it.’

‘ You may rely upon my hearty goodwill.’

‘ Thank you, very much.’

They shook hands warmly together, and Fortescue departed.

The next morning he went to the Lodge, and gave Mona an account of the visit he had received on the previous night. She was much moved as she said :

‘ I forgave him long ago, and have not ceased to pray for him. I thank God for his repentance. Tell him what I say, and give him my best wishes for his success in any good work he may hereafter undertake.’

Plainton sent the message to Fortescue, to the address he had left with him.



CHAPTER VII.

THE REAPER AND THE FLOWER.

ONE morning early the curate received a note from Mrs. Eugénie. Mona desired to see him. He hastened to the Lodge. Mona greeted him with a smile.

‘I hope you are not in pain now.’

‘No,’ she said softly, ‘I am quite free.’

‘I am very glad to hear it.’

‘Mamma, make them all leave the room, but you stay.’

The room was cleared; only Plainton and Mrs. Melody remaining behind.

Plainton sat on the bed. She held in one hand the ‘Lyra Apostolica’ he had given her on her birthday, and placing the other in his, looked at him long and earnestly.

‘ You have been very kind to me.’

‘ No, no ; it is I who have to thank you.

‘ I hardly knew that life was worth living till I knew you.’

‘ Don’t say so,’ he replied, with difficulty restraining his emotion ; but he felt that for her sake at least he ought to keep calm.

‘ I have had many bright days through you,’ she continued.

He moistened her lips, and begged her not to talk much.

‘ But I like to do so now, while I have strength. I can say what I want, if I take time, and you do not mind waiting.’

‘ I have arranged to remain here all day, Mona.’

‘ Thank you so much.’

She asked for the flowers Plainton had brought her that morning. He placed them in her hands. She looked at them fondly one by one, then turning to him, said :

‘ God knows best, but had it been His will, I could have wished to remain a little longer. I might have been of use——’ here her lips

trembled, and the tears came into her eyes.

He stooped and kissed her forehead as he said :

‘ We shall meet again, Mona, where there are no more partings.’

Recovering herself, she answered calmly, with a smile :

‘ Yes ; He knows what is best. I can leave it all with Him.’

Handing him the ‘ Lyra,’ she asked :

‘ Do you remember which poem you said you liked best ?’

‘ Yes, Mona.’

‘ Read it to me, please.’

He took the book and read as follows :

“ They are at rest :

We may not stir the heaven of their repose

By rude invoking voice, or prayer addrest

In waywardness to those,

Who in the mountain grotts of Eden lie,

And hear the fourfold river as it murmurs by.

“ They hear it sweep

In distance down the dark and savage vale ;

But they at rocky bed, or current deep,

Shall never more grow pale ;

They hear, and meekly muse, as fain to know
How long untired, unspent, that giant stream shall
flow.

‘ “And soothing sounds
Blend with the neighbouring waters as they glide ;
Posted along the haunted garden’s bounds,
Angelic forms abide,
Echoing, as words of watch, o’er lawn and grove
The verses of that hymn which seraphs chant
above.” ’

She now closed her eyes and slept for a long while. Later on she called for Plainton again, and said :

‘ You have many difficulties to contend with here ; I wish I could have helped you more.’

‘ You have been a great help, dear Mona. I shall always be grateful that I knew you.’

‘ You must not be over-anxious, and must learn to take things quietly.’

‘ I will remember your words.’

‘ You will have to fight and struggle, but it is a grand life.’

‘ I feel it so. But I need more faith and patience.’

‘ You have both. But you take things too much to heart. Bring me the flowers, please.’

After a while she asked :

‘ Do you remember putting the wreath on my head on my birthday ?’

‘ Yes, Mona.’

‘ I had felt no cross for some time before that.’

‘ I am glad you were happy.’

‘ Oh ! yes ; so happy. And I am now.’

‘ Thank God !’ he rejoined fervently.

She whispered to her mother to leave the room, and they were now left alone with God.

At her desire the curate prayed. They then spoke together for some minutes. When she had ceased he pronounced over her the Absolution in the Order for the Visitation of the Sick.

In the afternoon towards sunset he again came to her. She was now much weaker, and said softly :

‘ It is a bright world where I am going.’

‘Yes, Mona ; it is always bright where Jesus is.’

‘I remember your sermons on it in Advent.’

After a long pause, she held his hand firmly in her own, and said :

‘What a great thing it is to be ready ! I thank God for His mercy and love——’

These were the last words he heard her say, although she was conscious for some time afterwards, for he could feel her return the pressure of his hand.

As her departure seemed imminent, he now read the Commendatory Prayer, and continued to make intercession on her behalf.

She turned her head towards him once more, and thus remained with her eyes intently fixed upon his face. What a wealth of affection seemed to stream forth from them ! Gradually they grew more dim, but to the last, while consciousness looked forth from them, they dwelt upon his with the same expression of deep and tender love. Presently

her hand released his. The reaper had gathered the flower.

He passed a sad night. He felt as if he had lost part of himself. Mona had so completely understood him ; and although her aristocratic appearance and high-bred manners betokened an almost haughty character, she had ever been to him as gentle and confiding as a little child.

He did not at first realise the terrible blow he had received. But at last he understood what unthought-of happiness had been within his reach, and was now gone for ever. It was possible he might meet another friend, but hardly another Mona. In after-days he grieved more for her than when she had just gone.

On the following evening he brought some flowers for her, and placed them on her breast. How calmly beautiful she looked ! The lines of pain were gone from her face, and she wore the quiet, happy smile which had especially characterised her previous to her last illness.

Plainton felt that as a clergyman he was specially bound to keep calm amid all scenes of human misery and sorrow. The physician must be master of himself if he is to relieve the pain of others.

He had sometimes found it very difficult to carry out his principle rigidly. For sorrow soon aroused his sympathies, and the distresses of others were forthwith made his own. Still in his clerical ministrations he always exerted his will to the utmost, and prayed most fervently that he might be calm and master of his own emotions.

For this reason he had been somewhat constrained in his manner in speaking to Mrs. Melody and Mrs. Eugénie, and the tight grasp he kept upon his own feelings had made him seem almost cold and unsympathetic.

‘Do you think,’ asked Mrs. Melody of her friend, ‘that Mr. Plainton really feels Mona’s death? He seems to take it very calmly.’

‘I can hardly make out,’ replied that lady.

‘ I think he must, but probably he feels bound, as a matter of duty, not to show it.’

An incident which occurred that day convinced her that it was so.

The curate, with all his efforts to take calmly and bravely whatever God should send, could not command sleep to ‘ hang upon his penthouse lid,’ nor could he compel himself to take food when he did not feel hungry. Sleeplessness, want of nourishment, and sorrow at heart soon began to tell upon him, and he looked haggard and feverish.

It was but two days before the funeral. He rose early as usual, and having discharged such duties as called for immediate attention, took his offering of flowers to the beautiful dead. Each day he had come to the Lodge they had left him alone in Mona’s chamber ; but to-day he was unusually long in his stay there, and at last Mrs. Eugénie, becoming alarmed, quietly ascended the stairs and approached the room. Hearing a voice as of some one conversing, she paused on the threshold by the half-open door and listened :

Plainton was standing with his arms crossed upon his breast, looking down upon the face of his late pupil :

‘ Come back, Mona dear, for a little while ; I want to speak to you. Leave for a few moments the flowers of paradise, I have something to tell you. I could not say it before, I did not know. Come, darling ! come. You have gone before I could speak : I was so poor, I could not—but now I am rich. All the gold of the Antipodes is mine. I have but to ask and I shall receive. Come, Mona, let me whisper to you ; no one else shall hear !’

Then, as if suddenly recollecting himself, he exclaimed in a subdued voice :

‘ O God, forgive ! Make perfect Thy strength in my weakness !’ and kneeling down, he prayed earnestly.

When he rose again and met Mrs. Eugénie at the door, he appeared calm and collected as usual, and spent some time in devotion with her and Mrs. Melody.

Plainton was glad to find that the death of

Miss Melody was hardly known in Pollington, so little had the family visited there of late. He was therefore spared the pain of hearing people comment upon it, and of having to answer well-meant but trying inquiries.

When the funeral had taken place he did his best to comfort the bereaved mother, but to little purpose. He, however, rightly argued that her grief was too violent to last very long.

As soon as the necessary arrangements could be made, the Lodge was resigned, and Mrs. Melody went to reside in London. At her request, the curate designed a cross for Mona's grave, as he said most of those placed in the cemeteries were wrongly proportioned. It was executed in white marble, and bore by his wish the single word—

M O N A.

He went to see it as soon as it had been set up. He was quite alone. It was a bright, sunshiny day. When he came to the grave,

which was under the shadow of a wide-spreading tree, he instinctively removed his hat, and kneeling down, prayed that God would grant to her a place of refreshment, light, and peace.

He rose comforted and strengthened. She did not seem far off. He felt that from her abode of bliss amidst the 'cloud of witnesses' she was looking down upon him and sympathising with his struggles. Plucking a single lily from her grave, he left the cemetery, and took the first train he could get back to Pollington.

It may be convenient to mention here an incident which happened somewhat later.

Mrs. Melody was anxious to have a medalion in marble placed in Pollington church in memory of her child. She went to see Mr. Hatter about it, and to make inquiries as to the fees.

Mr. Hatter received her very courteously.

'So sorry for the occasion which brings you

here, I am sure. Where do you wish the tablet to be placed ?

‘I must be guided by you in that. I should have preferred it as near the east end as possible.’

‘Ah ! that would be rather expensive, but I suppose you know that.’

‘No, I imagined there would be some small fee for erecting it, but I certainly did not suppose it would be heavy.’

‘Do you know that nothing can be put up in the church without a faculty from the Archbishop, which would cost alone at least £60 ?’

‘Dear me ! I was not aware of that.’

‘Then there is the fee for compensation to the fabric of the church. You see every tablet erected on the walls damages to some extent the building, and it is only fair that a fee should be paid to the repairing fund of the church.’

‘That seems reasonable. But how much would that be ?’

‘About £20.’

‘Would that be the whole of the expense?’

‘There is of course the Incumbent’s fee, which helps to make up his income. You are aware that it is but a trifle I derive from the church, and have two very expensive curates to keep.’

‘Oh! I do not complain of the Vicar’s fee. But how much would that be?’

‘It is not a matter over which I have any control, as it is fixed by Act of Parliament. I would willingly remit it in your case, but I dare not do it. It would not, however, exceed £20.’

Mrs. Melody was silent. It really seemed an extravagant sum to pay in fees—£100—and nothing to show for it. She thought she would not go any further in the matter at present.

The Vicar observed her hesitation, and said:

‘We shall miss Miss Melody very much. Not that we saw her very often; but we always admired her;’ here he brushed away a tear.

‘I am glad you liked her,’ replied Mrs.

Melody, in pleased surprise. ‘Everybody that knew her did.’

‘No one could help it, who had once seen her. I hope, by-and-by, that you will let me have a photograph of her. She had such a remarkably intellectual face.’

Here the Vicar paused, and Mrs. Melody began to think that she would after all have the tablet erected. Still £100 in fees really was a very large sum.

‘Eh—eh,’ continued the Vicar, tentatively plucking his beard, ‘I—eh—have been thinking, that if—eh—you like to do without the faculty—the tablet might be erected at a less expense.’

‘But how do without it? You are not allowed to do that, are you?’

‘Eh—eh—we are not allowed to do it, certainly; but it is an enormous abuse which will have to be swept away soon. Your case is one in which it presses very heavily.’

‘If we did without the faculty the fees would then be reduced to £40.’

‘Exactly.’

‘ I should not mind that—if you think it will be quite safe, and can manage it.’

‘ Well, considering the peculiar circumstances of your case, I will undertake to say that by your paying me £40 I shall be able to arrange everything. But that is on the condition that it is not mentioned to any one else. It must not be quoted as a precedent, as in that case you might be compelled to pay for the faculty after all.’

‘ Certainly not ! I should not think of talking about it. Besides, I have no friends in Pollington, and am never likely to be in the neighbourhood again. My daughter liked this church better than any other, and that is the only reason I have for wishing to erect the tablet here.’

‘ Very well. We understand, then, that this matter is quite a private arrangement between ourselves, and that I would not promise to do as much for any one else.’

‘ Certainly. It is really very good of you. I had no notion you had such a regard for poor Mona,’ rejoined Mrs. Melody, wiping her eyes.

‘ Oh ! yes. So has Mrs. Hatter, but we never make a parade of our favouritisms, as it would excite such fearful jealousy.’

The money was paid, and the tablet was erected.



CHAPTER VIII.

THE RICH MAN'S JEWEL.

PLAINTON had already told Ethel in one of his letters how he had lost a great friend. The children did not know Miss Melody, but they were aware that Plainton visited at Dargal Lodge, and thought very highly of Mona.

They had come home for the Easter holidays full of sympathy for their friend in his deep sorrow, but they had seen but little of him, for he had, as far as possible, refrained from calling at the Manor House. When the vacation had come to an end they were still kept at home, owing to the severe indisposition of their mother. Plainton received many invitations to luncheon from Mrs.

Templeton, in order that he might meet the children as of old, but he accepted but one of them.

Ethel was now seventeen, though in appearance and manners she seemed a good deal younger. He could see that she deeply resented the reserve with which he treated her. If she met him in the street a deep flush would suffuse her cheek, and the tears would come into her eyes, but she did not venture to give expression to her displeasure in words. Plainton was perplexed and pained. He could not bear to think that she should suppose that he had less regard for her than formerly, or that anything less than necessity dictated the course he was pursuing. What should he do ?

To explain to her the real reason of his apparently strange behaviour was simply impossible. Yet he wished he could say something which would give her to understand that it was regard for her happiness alone which governed his conduct.

Had he followed his own inclination he

would have been with the children much more than before, for their bright faces and childlike talk would have relieved the heaviness of his heart. He felt absolutely alone in his grief. It is true he found some alleviation in the contemplation of nature, and would converse by the hour with the river, the sky, the trees, and the flowers.

He even imagined at times that Mona would suddenly appear to him from behind them. For a curious fancy took possession of him ; the beautiful natural effects which from a child had awed and delighted him, now seemed to him to be messages sent by Mona from the unseen world. She smiled upon him in the tints of flowers, she wept for him in the rain-drops, she waved her arms towards him in the bending trees, she looked down upon him in the glistening stars, he felt her breath in the evening breeze, and oftentimes she floated across the sky in a bright, fleecy cloud. Invariably when this thought came upon him, and he recognised the presence of Mona, he would remove his hat and bow his head, as

in the presence of one higher and holier than himself.

He was taking his favourite walk by the river, and pondering these things in his heart, when presently he saw coming towards him Ethel and her sister Maud.

Each of them caught hold of an arm.

‘Oh! you bad man!’ exclaimed Ethel, ‘for hiding away from us for so long. Now we have caught you at last, we mean to keep you. I shall not let you go any more.’

‘I think, Ethel, you will soon be glad to get rid of me.’

‘I shall not. Why do you say so?’

‘Because I am getting old and cross.’

‘Oh! what a story! But I don’t mind if you are, provided you do not shut yourself up where I cannot get at you.’

‘Walk back with me a little way.’

The children turned and walked by his side.

As they walked along, Ethel at length remarked Plainton’s restrained manner, and said:

‘ You are not well to-day, Mr. Plainton, are you ?’

‘ Not very well, Ethel.’

‘ Oh ! you have too much to do, and too much to think of. I wish I could take half of it for you.’

‘ You cannot do that, my child.’

‘ No, but I do wish I could so much ! But don’t think to-day, please, Mr. Plainton,’ she entreated, taking hold of his hand ; ‘ you look so stern.’

They had now come to a little elevation in the bank, where there was lying on the ground the trunk of a large tree which had been blown down by a gale a few weeks back.

‘ Let us sit down here a little while,’ said Plainton, ‘ I want to speak to you.’

Ethel looked up wonderingly into his face, and asked :

‘ Is it something nice you are going to tell us ? Else I would rather not hear it,’ she added, in a half-frightened tone.

He did not answer, but sat down on the

tree, while Maud and Ethel took their usual positions on each side.

‘ I want to tell you a little story,’ he said.

‘ Oh ! yes,’ exclaimed Ethel, greatly relieved ; ‘ I don’t mind a story. I thought you were about to say that you were going away, or some such dreadful thing.’

Plainton half-relented of his self-imposed task as Ethel continued to prattle on ; yet it must be done. But she, feeling assured that nothing unpleasant was coming, took his hand in her own, as her companion, looking straight before him into the water, began thus, in true orthodox fashion :

‘ Once upon a time, in a country in the far East, there lived a very rich man. He had a beautiful house, and lovely grounds. All the rarest birds of the country came and built their nests in his trees, and his garden was full of splendid flowers of all sizes and hues.

‘ He was thought a great deal of by the princes and nobles of his country, and people would come from a long distance to see his domain and walk in his garden. But he was

most celebrated for his jewels. No one had such beautiful stones as he. There was one small jewel of a very lovely colour, which he especially valued and often wore upon his breast. When the sun shone on it by day, or the light of the lamps suspended in the room made it sparkle at night, it sent forth such exquisite hues as were hardly ever seen anywhere. As he moved it about you would see perhaps a deep violet, then a rich crimson, or a bright blue, or a brilliant gleam of pure, white light.

‘All the people admired this stone, and wondered to whom he would give it. For he was a very generous man, and oftentimes when he had feasted some friend he would present to him a jewel as a parting gift. But he said he intended to keep this one to give to some rich young noble who would wear it on his breast as he himself had worn it, and let it be seen and admired by all the world.’

Plainton paused for a moment or two, and Ethel looked inquiringly into his face. She

still kept hold of his hand. Continuing to look into the river, he proceeded :

‘ One day there came to his house a traveller, whom the rich man had overtaken as he journeyed, and had invited to spend the night with him.

‘ The traveller had a long way to go. He was wandering through the country from town to town, and from village to village, teaching the poor and ignorant, the young and the old, and all who would listen, out of the sacred book he carried with him. He used to find out the sick and the dying, the leper, the outcast, and the criminal, that he might tell them about the wonderful things in the book, for it had a message for each one.

‘ The traveller was a middle-aged man, and very poor. He wore a long, coarse woollen garment, tied round his waist with a broad sash, and on his breast he carried a flat ring of iron, which all the sacred teachers wore. This ring was a sign of his office, and there was a great deal about it in the sacred book.

Some of the wealthy teachers of the book had a jewel set in the midst of their ring. But this wayfaring man had no jewel——'

Here the speaker's voice faltered for a few seconds. Presently he continued :

'Some said he had one once, but had lost it. Others said he never had one, and that he did not want one. When he himself was asked about it, he replied, "I thought I had one once, but it was only in a dream. When I awoke it was gone."

'When the traveller had come into the house, the rich man made him very welcome. After he had supped, his host showed him his beautiful jewels, especially the one he wore on his breast, which he took off, and told the wayfaring man how he meant to give it to some rich young noble, who could put it in a splendid setting and wear it upon his breast for all the world to see and admire.

'The traveller took it into his hand, and praised its beauty very highly when he saw how it sparkled and gleamed with all the most lovely colours he had ever seen.

‘The rich man could not have given this jewel to the traveller, because he had only the common iron ring in which to keep it, and because he was not often seen in palaces or noble mansions, but spent his time mostly in narrow streets and dirty lanes, in poor cottages and wretched hovels, amongst the destitute and sick, the leprous and the fever-stricken, the outcast and the criminal. He was very seldom seen amongst the noble and the great.

‘As he gave it back to the rich man, he said, “Happy be the rich young noble to whom you shall give this jewel, and may he live long to wear it !”

‘Early on the next morning the wayfaring man rose to go, and blessing the house of his host, went forth once more on his journey.’

Ethel had let go Plainton’s hand as the story proceeded, and he felt her tears fall upon it. Taking his handkerchief he dried her eyes, and said :

‘Come, my children, we must go.’

They rose and walked silently awhile by the river. Presently Ethel said :

‘ Mr. Plainton, we were so sorry to hear of your great loss.’

‘ It is a great loss, Ethel.’

‘ You will miss her very much.’

‘ Yes, more than I could have thought.’

‘ She was very clever, was she not ?’

‘ Yes, and good too.’

‘ I wish I was clever——’

‘ It is in your power to be good, my child, which is far better than being clever.’

‘ Oh ! but you like clever people so much.’

‘ Do I ? But I like good people better, and those who are both good and clever best of all, I suppose.’

‘ I wish I could keep you from being so sad.’

‘ It is very good of you to wish it, Ethel. I shall be better by-and-by. But you do make me happier when I see your bright face.’

Ethel looked radiant at this. She was as easily moved to laughter as to tears, and not unfrequently changed from one mood to the other without any perceptible transition.

‘I am so glad. Let me help you all I can.’

‘I will let you help me all you may.’

The sisters then gave Plainton some account of their school life. The system, order, and discipline to which they had been subjected were quite new to them when first they went from home, and had evidently been beneficial. But Plainton was not quite sure as to the effect upon their characters of their mingling with other girls of different dispositions. The conversation which immediately follows made him think that the benefit to be derived from school life is not wholly unmixed.

The children had exhausted the topic of school incident, and had been plucking the wild flowers which grew on the river-bank. As Ethel presented Plainton her bouquet, she remarked with a very perky look :

‘I don’t think much of that story you told us.’

‘Why not?’ he asked in surprise, for this

was the first time that his stories had ever been found fault with.

‘Oh ! the rich man was a regular old duffer !’

‘A what ! Ethel ?’ asked Plainton, standing still, and looking aghast.

‘A duffer. Don’t you know what a duffer is ?’

‘Wherever did you pick up such a dreadful word ?’

‘At school, of course. Mamma sent us there to learn all we could,’ she continued, with a mischievous, provoking glance at her companion’s face.

‘But don’t you know that you are talking the most-shocking slang ever invented ?’

‘Am I ? But it’s only one word, Mr. Plainton, and “duffer” is such a jolly word. Let me keep “duffer,” please. It exactly expresses what I mean.’

Plainton tried to look very grave, but found it quite impossible to resist his disposition to smile at Ethel’s comment on his allegory.

‘I must talk to your mamma, and see if we cannot find some cure for this bad habit you have acquired.’

‘ Oh! that’s quite unnecessary, Mr. Plainton, as Harry says I am a “ perfect cure ” already.’

‘ Really, really — I am shocked and astounded.’

‘ Oh! please, don’t be. It’s so very unpleasant.’

‘ Now tell me what you mean by calling the rich man names.’

‘ Why this; if he had had any common sense at all he would have seen that he could not do better than give the traveller the jewel. For as that poor man had none of his own, he sadly wanted one. And if the wayfaring man spent most of his time in visiting the sick and poor, it would have been of most use to him, as the people he went amongst would have been pleased to look at something pretty.

‘ And if it was really a good jewel and so very beautiful, it did not need a rich setting. Only paste and wretched imitations require tawdry embellishments to set them off,’ concluded Ethel, with a toss of her head and an energetic shake of her long mane.

Plainton was quite unprepared for this very practical comment on his parable, and remained silent. Ethel had certainly developed since she had been at school. After a pause, the young commentator added :

‘ Besides, you don’t allow the poor jewel to have any say in the matter at all. What is the use of being a jewel if you cannot shine where you like ? The unfortunate jewel is the most to be pitied, I think ; poor, helpless thing ! If I had been it I would have turned as black as coal, and would not have looked pretty any more.’

As Plainton remained silent, Ethel suddenly changed her mock-indignant tone and said :

‘ Don’t be cross because I said that ; I did not mean it, you know.’

‘ I am not cross, my child,’ returned Plainton, with a smile ; ‘ but you certainly do grow more comical and amusing every time I see you.’

Ethel was quite satisfied to be thought comical if it put her companion in a good

humour, and began dancing in front of him as she sang the following nursery rhyme :

‘ “ Humpty-Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty-Dumpty had a great fall,
All the king’s horses and all the king’s men,
Could not set Humpty-Dumpty up again.” ’

From the very marked emphasis she gave to her words, and the low curtsey she made towards him at the end of each line, Plainton greatly feared that the rhyme had something of a personal meaning in it, and with considerable misgiving he asked :

‘ Who is Humpty-Dumpty, Ethel ? ’

‘ Dear me ! don’t you know ? ’ Running a long way out of his reach, she added, ‘ Why, that’s the name of your story, Mr. Plainton ; didn’t you say so ? Poor Humpty-Dumpty ! ’

Then returning to him and taking hold of his hand, she said :

‘ Please, I won’t do so any more. I am quite proper now.’

‘ I think, Miss Ethel Templeton,’ rejoined Plainton, endeavouring to look down upon

her in a lofty kind of way, 'it is quite time you were.'

When they arrived at the Manor House he stopped to say good-bye.

'Won't you come in as you always used to do, Mr. Plainton?' asked Ethel, in a pleading tone, while both children took hold of his arm.

'Please do,' said Maud, who was not given to much speaking.

'Not this evening, my children. I cannot.'

'Promise you will soon.'

'I promise. Good-bye.'



CHAPTER IX.

‘BLESSED ARE YE WHEN MEN SHALL REVILE
YOU.’

MR. BROADBEAM was standing at his gate with his hands in his pocket, and talking to Steptoe, when Plainton passed by with Ethel and Maud. Broadbeam looked at them with a critical eye.

‘They are pretty enough girls,’ he remarked, ‘but it is a pity they are such little runts.’

‘They are small,’ rejoined his companion, ‘but they dress well.’

‘Plainton looks very bad.’

‘He does. I have been talking to the Vicar about it, but he will not have it that there is anything the matter with him.’

‘The Vicar’s a skunk. Plainton wants three months’ rest. He has been getting ill for the last six months ; and if you let me know when he is going to preach on Sundays, morning or evening, I will not go, as it puts me in a fever to see a man get up into the pulpit who looks as if he were going to drop down dead the next minute.’

‘He was very bad on Sunday. I thought he would never hold out till he had finished his sermon.’

‘What does Hatter want to kill him for?’

‘Well, he says that Plainton only requires a course of blue pills to be as strong as I am.’

‘Blue pills be—— I beg your pardon,’ said Broadbeam, recollecting that as a magistrate he was liable to fine himself five shillings for profane swearing. It is probable, therefore, that the apology was not addressed to Steptoe, but to himself in his official capacity.

In the following week a ruri-decanal chapter was to be held at the Vicarage, when Hatter had undertaken to read a paper on the ‘Validity of English Orders.’ Finding his chest some-

what tender, and being very busy with his new book, he asked Plainton to prepare and read a paper on the subject instead of himself.

‘I have all the principal books and pamphlets on the subject, both for and against. You can give a digest of them and finish up with a few remarks of your own.’

Plainton undertook the work, prepared and read the paper, which was well received.

The Vicar made an acute, interesting, and able speech. Plainton thought he had never heard him speak with more effect. For although the curate considered that Hatter was often very effective in the pulpit, he most admired his peculiar intellectual powers when exercised in debate. The gladiatorial skill with which he sent an adversary on his back, the ingenuity with which he found a flaw in what seemed a faultless argument, his fine faculty of using precisely the right words to express his meaning, and the adroitness with which he cautiously advanced his own opinion, combined to render him an able speaker, and a most dangerous and difficult opponent.

The great drawback to it all was his unscrupulousness and disregard of truth—facts were invented, distorted, or suppressed, without hesitation, if it would help his case.

How often had Plainton fervently wished that a man with such great mental gifts could have also a true, great, and noble heart! How gladly would he spend and be spent for such a one! But, alas! as it was, the man was a monstrosity—a giant's head on the body of a dwarf.

When Plainton went home after the meeting he felt he had rather over-exerted himself. His nerves seemed quite prostrate. He had an extremely painful sensation along the left arm and at the back of the head. During the night the pain in the arm became so acute that he was obliged to lie with it outstretched. He was attacked also with a numbed feeling about the heart. He thought at first of waking his sister and sending for Dr. Jolly, who had been attending him for two or three weeks, but he resolved at last to try to hold out till the morning, as he was afraid that

Margaret would be so greatly alarmed. He arose unrefreshed, but with less pain.

Sunday came. Plainton struggled through his sermon in the morning with many pauses. The Vicar invited him to luncheon. After the meal they went out on to the lawn. It was a bright day in the early summer. Mr. Hatter made many particular inquiries as to his symptoms, and also asked as to the diseases with which any of his family had been afflicted.

‘I was thinking that perhaps you have some hereditary tendency to disease beginning now to develop; it might be heart disease, or probably, from the symptoms you exhibit, paralysis of the brain. Is either of those complaints in your family?’

Plainton assured him that he was not aware that any member of his family had ever had any complaint, except, indeed, his younger brother.’

‘Ah! that’s it, no doubt!’ exclaimed Hatter, rubbing his hands in a gratified manner; ‘what did he suffer from?’

‘He was thrown from his horse, and broke his arm.’

‘Eh—eh,’ gasped the Vicar, who could not tell from Plainton’s serious face whether he was laughing at him or not, ‘of course it could not be that. Is that all you know of?’

‘Well, my mother has been very ill every two or three years, but——’

‘There!’ exclaimed Hatter, triumphantly, ‘I thought as much from the first. Why did you not tell us this before? This will certainly give us the clue we seek. It would most likely come from the mother. Periodical, you say?’

‘Every two or three years; but it could hardly be catching, as——’

‘But you have not studied medicine,’ said Hatter, impatiently, ‘and are therefore not a competent judge. It might not be catching, and yet hereditary, as no doubt we shall find to be the case here. What was her illness?’

‘I was speaking of the illness attending her confinements. But the doctor said she was

an astonishing woman to pull through so quickly.'

'Eh—eh—eh,' gasped Hatter, looking very angry, but checking himself when he observed that Plainton, with unmoved countenance, was absently contemplating the horizon, he continued, 'I have seen Dr. Jolly about you, but he does not seem to me to have a clear view of your complaint. Have you any pain now?'

'In my left arm, but not acute.'

'Let us try it. Can you lift this chair with your left hand only?'

Plainton lifted it.

'Does it hurt you?'

'A little, not very much.'

'Hold it out at arm's length.'

He complied.

'Try this heavier one.'

He lifted it with difficulty.

'Does that hurt you more?'

'Yes.'

'Ah! I think you take too much exercise. That is no doubt the origin of your illness.'

In your present condition it will be very bad for you to go away, as you will only exhaust yourself walking about the country. I will give you two blue pills to take to-night, and then we will see how you are at the end of the week.'

A week or two before this, Plainton had received a letter from young Mr. Cumberland, whom he had known as a boy, and who being now about to prepare for holy orders, wanted some one to read with him. He sent Plainton a pressing offer, begging him, as he was not well, to resign his curacy and to come down into Hampshire on a long visit.

The curate, after a very prolonged interview with Mr. Hatter on the matter, had declined this kind and opportune offer. But his friend wrote a still more urgent letter, offering to write to the Vicar as well if there were any obstacle in the way which money could remove. This second letter reached Plainton on the day after the above-mentioned interview. He felt he ought to accept it, as he was gradually getting weaker and less capable

of mental labour. He wrote to Mr. Hatter to this effect. He was in a weary, disappointed frame of mind ; he had had a sleepless night, and he wrote a passionate letter, taking a somewhat desponding view of his work at Pollington, and speaking in strong terms of the worldliness and unbelief which prevailed.

The Vicar invited him to luncheon, in accordance with his usual precedent, and then spoke on the subject of Cumberland's letter.

‘ Eh—eh—I like his letter to you very much. I suppose he is very rich ?’

‘ He will be shortly.’

‘ Your nerves certainly seem to be quite shattered. Shall I write to him on your behalf and make the necessary arrangements ?’

Plainton was delighted at this. He knew that he would never get away unless it were on Hatter's terms, and he would be glad to have the matter settled without any more discussion.

‘I shall be very glad if you will,’ he replied.

‘Oh yes, my dear Plainton ; I will do anything in the world for you. But I really think you had better not go to Hampshire, it is far too relaxing. I must persuade Mr. Cumberland to take you to Switzerland. By-the-by, have you said anything to him about terms ?’

‘Oh no ; he is an old friend, and it is not necessary.’

‘But that will never do. He is rich—he wants you to prepare him for holy orders, and ought to pay you handsomely. You will require a good fee, you see, as you will have the expense of a substitute during your absence.’

‘A substitute ?’ said Plainton, in bewilderment.

‘Why, you would not think of leaving me in the lurch, I am sure. Three months in Switzerland would quite set you up. You would come back perfectly restored, and succeed me as vicar here, or go to a much better

living. Whereas if you throw up your curacy altogether, you will be resigning all your brilliant prospects.'

Plainton was in no condition for discussion, and it is probable that if the Vicar had proposed to take his clothes upon the spot and to skin him afterwards as an equitable compensation to himself, he would hardly have argued the point. He remained silent, while Hatter continued :

'You are aware I get nothing out of the living here, or next to nothing ; and I think we ought, for the sake of the church, to make Mr. Cumberland pay. You will then be under no pecuniary obligation to me, and the church will be the better for it.'

'Well, I am not strong enough to go into the matter. Make what arrangement you can, and let me go.'

First of all the Vicar tried to get Cumberland to come and see him, to talk the matter over. Failing this, he urged on him the necessity of their 'dear friend Plainton' going to a bracing climate.

Cumberland wrote back that in his opinion their dear friend required absolute rest of mind and body for a time, and that the question of climate was not so important.

Finally, Mr. Hatter informed Plainton that Mr. Cumberland did not seem to appreciate the curate's weakly condition, and that as the matter had been left entirely in his hands, he thought it his imperative duty to do all in his power to prevent Plainton going to Hampshire; that consequently the negotiations were fruitless. The correspondence had occupied but a few days.

In the meanwhile Steptoe had again been at the Vicar about his fellow-curate's really pitiable condition of health. It happened on the Saturday morning of the week in which Hatter had given Plainton the above information, Steptoe called to see the latter. He found him so feeble that it seemed quite impossible that he could appear in the pulpit on the following morning. Plainton told him of his bad nights, and of the pain in his left arm, and at the back of his head.

Steptoe was much concerned, and said :

‘ Do not trouble your head about to-morrow. I will see the Vicar, and will arrange everything. You keep yourself quiet.’

‘ Oh no, thank you. I am due in the pulpit to-morrow morning, and will try not to disappoint Hatter.’

Steptoe said no more, but left and went to the Vicar.

Hatter guessed his errand. His lips trembled with rage, and his face assumed that peculiar yellowish-green hue which always appeared when he was deeply vexed or thwarted.

Steptoe plunged at once *in medias res*. He described Plainton’s condition, and wound up by saying that ‘ he is quite unfit to preach, and I have told him he must not think of it.’

Hatter stamped his foot, and began to storm incoherently. At length he said :

‘ You are urged by my enemies in the parish to come and bully me.’

‘ Mr. Hatter, it is of no use to try on that kind of thing with me. Plainton has been

overworked, and must rest, and there's an end of it.'

'But there's not an end of it. Here have I been keeping Plainton on entirely at his own request, because he has not a farthing nor a friend in the world, and then I am charged with killing him.'

Steptoe looked astounded at this new view of the case.

'Yes,' put in Mrs. Hatter, who would have been a tolerably honest woman had she not been demoralised by so continually feeling it her duty to back up her husband in his unprincipled and dishonourable doings, 'it is perfectly scandalous that Mr. Plainton should take my husband's money and do no work for it. He has not been earning his salary for months past. If he is an honest man, why does he not resign, and then we could get another curate?'

'Why,' said Steptoe, in amazement, 'he is most anxious to get away!'

'Ah! you may believe that if you like,' said Hatter, 'but I ought to know what he

has said to me and Mrs. Hatter. He is very poor, very poor indeed. I could not think of turning him adrift on the world, and letting him starve. I am bound to retain him as long as I can, poor fellow, although he has done next to nothing for months past. I am deeply sorry for him,' remarked the Vicar, with choking voice; and pulling out his tobacco-stained pocket-handkerchief, which speedily scented the whole room, and the sight of which gave Steptoe a strong sensation of being at sea in rough weather—he wiped away a tear.

'Had I consulted my own interests,' he continued, with an occasional snuffle, 'I should have sent him off long ago.'

'But he *has* resigned,' exclaimed Steptoe, angrily, 'several times.'

'Oh yes,' rejoined the Vicar, unctuously, with a malicious sparkle in his cold, cruel eye, 'but has always taken very good care to withdraw his resignation before I could act upon it.'

'It is really monstrous!' put in Mrs.

Hatter. 'There have we to maintain him and his sister, and get absolutely nothing in return, except that our generosity is put down to mean and selfish motives! It is the way with all good and noble deeds in this evil world.'

'And as to his sleepless nights,' continued the Vicar, 'that comes of over-eating.'

'Over-eating!' exclaimed Steptoe.

'Yes,' rejoined Hatter, who was now quite calm again. 'I observed him at the luncheon on the day of the ruri-decanal chapter. He had several helpings of meat and pastry, and drank wine as well as my best bitter beer: enough to give the strongest man a pain in the heart.'

'Well,' observed Steptoe, contemptuously, 'you are the first gentleman I ever met, who invited a man to his table and then talked of what he ate. Besides which, you are quite wrong as to what he took, as I sat next him.'

'But you must have forgotten. I took particular notice, and told Mrs. Hatter of it afterwards—did I not?'

‘Certainly,’ replied the faithful wife; ‘you said Plainton had been gorging himself, and would suffer for it.’

‘And a curate,’ resumed the Vicar, spitefully, ‘is not supposed to eat at his Vicar’s table as if he were at home. But never mind; Plainton need not come to church to-morrow. Let him go to bed. I will pay for his work to be done, and contrive to feed him and his sister for nothing, as I have done for months past and you may continue to give any opinion on it you please. Good-morning.’

As soon as Steptoe was gone, Hatter said :

‘I suppose Plainton has had another attack of exhaustion. I will write to him about it, and tell him I have arranged for to-morrow.’

‘We shall have all the parish about our ears if you are not careful, Enoch.’

‘You had better give instructions to Miss Piggott and Mrs. Chine to let the people know quietly that Plainton has neglected his duties for months past, and is suffering from indigestion, brought on by over-eating and drinking, and by want of work.’

‘ But will any one believe it ?’

‘ Not at first. But if we keep on insisting on it, they will at last think there must be truth in it. You know what fools most of them are, and ready to swallow anything, if it is put before them in the right form.’

‘ Well, they are nearly equal to anything in the way of belief—except the three Creeds,’ returned his astute lady. ‘ How I love them all !’ she added, with energy, as she cut a sheet of paper into strips.

‘ A very proper Christian-like spirit !’ said her husband, with a grin. ‘ I think we both have ample cause for loving them, and we fulfil our duty in that respect—or try to do so.’

‘ Had you not better write to Dr. Cartwright again ?’

‘ Yes, I will give him another prod, for fear the catastrophe of Plainton’s illness should happen before we can get away.’

Plainton had faithfully discharged all the duties entrusted to him, notwithstanding that it had cost him a great effort. The greater portion of the surplice work, as well as most of

the preaching, had been done by him, and the sick and the poor had been visited as regularly as when he first came. Hatter, however, relied upon the hope that if he could only get sufficient mud thrown, some of it might at last stick. He also trusted a good deal to the support of what might be called the universal corruption element of human nature: that is to say, he reckoned upon finding a certain number of the parishioners, however small, who, disliking the severity of Plainton's preaching, would not be displeased to hear that his precept and practice did not accord. With his characteristic subtlety, Hatter thought that although his curate was very popular, it might be possible to unearth some one or two of the congregation who, feeling themselves hard hit by Plainton's unsparing denunciations of luxurious selfishness and frivolous worldliness, would be willing to believe in the preacher's own leaning towards the temptations of the world and of the flesh, though unwilling, notwithstanding, to relinquish their friendship for the man.

Hatter was very anxious to secure even that modified form of support to his scheme of ingenious calumny, if none other were available.

It was especially to the city element of the congregation that he looked for this support. He was doomed to be signally disappointed. The city merchant, hardworking, generous, and honourable, though often given to somewhat inconclusive reasoning in matters outside business, and mostly governed by the chances of early education in affairs of religion, has an instinctive hatred of meanness, falsehood, and trickery. He embodies some of the finest characteristics of the Englishman, and it is he and those sprung from his class who have chiefly contributed to make England what it is.

There was not one of them in Pollington but who held by the opinion he had himself formed of the curate from his own observation, and not one word of the really clever rumours disseminated by Hatter was believed.



CHAPTER X.

A STRANGE PARTING.

To return to the incidents of the eventful Saturday already mentioned.

When Steptoe left the Vicarage, he went to Plainton's lodgings, which had been lately removed into one of the by-lanes. He was out. Steptoe called again in the evening, but the curate had gone down to the Manor House to see Mrs. Templeton. Margaret was at home, and Steptoe, in honest indignation, told her all that had passed between him and the Vicar.

‘I tell you all this,’ said the honest fellow, ‘because I look upon Plainton as a brother, and cannot bear to think that he should be so

deceived as to Hatter's true character, or should suppose that he would scruple to say or do anything, however untrue or dishonourable, in order to carry out his own views or to cover up his double-dealing. All that your brother has done for the Vicar—his loyalty, devotion, and hard work—count absolutely for nothing with such a man. Hatter and his wife are ready to blast his character at any moment, if by so doing they can spare themselves.'

'I wish you could see my brother yourself. He quite thinks he is serving Hatter by remaining on as he has been doing. Would you mind coming with me, as I think we shall find him at the Templetons?'

'Certainly not. It is best that he should know everything without delay.'

They went to the Manor House, and found Plainton slowly walking round the garden with Kate. Steptoe took him aside and gave him a rapid account of his interview with the Vicar. Poor Plainton was astounded. Although he had long known, to his cost, that

Hatter was dishonest, and untruthful, he had with his strong faith in the ultimate goodness of human nature, hoped against hope to see an improvement in his character. He felt that although the Vicar might in a moment of irresistible temptation steal his purse, he would not rob him of his good name, and thus far at least he would be true to him.

Did he not know how honourable and accurate a man Steptoe was, his account of Hatter's baseness and meanness would have seemed incredible. It was Steptoe's painful part to draw aside the remaining veil which hid Hatter's true self from Plainton, and the last now looked on the man as he was in all his hideous moral deformity. He could now understand one or two other statements which the Vicar had made in the parish, but which the hopeful curate had tried to forget. He now at last by the overruling providence of God realised that the man, whom notwithstanding all his failings and shortcomings he had tried to trust and had faithfully served, was ready to blacken his character, ruin his

prospects, destroy his health, and even bring him to an untimely grave, provided he could thereby compass his own inconceivably paltry and selfish ends.

With this revelation, which he regarded as nothing short of divine, came the thought of his own helplessness. He saw himself in the snare of the fowler, the toils had closed round him. If he went to the Vicar to remonstrate, he knew from previous experience that everything would be denied or abjectly apologised for, and he would still be liable to be the victim of any further nefarious schemes, and to be sacrificed in life or character at the moment which might best serve the purpose of his relentless enemy. But were it not so, he was too ill to endure an angry discussion.

One course only remained, and that was instantly to leave. This step would baffle his persecutor, and might save his own life. Steptoe had walked on in front when he had finished his statement, and had left Plinton to his thoughts.

The curate looked up wistfully to the starlit sky. What a realm of purity, harmony, and peace it seemed! It had been a somewhat sultry day. As he continued to gaze, there was a slight sound, as of distant thunder, and, borne on the night-wind, he fancied he heard a gentle voice, which said softly, but with perfect distinctness :

‘Come away! come away! come away!’

Plainton was in a weak and highly nervous condition, and was unable to resist the influence of his vivid imaginings. He reverentially uncovered his head, and raising his hand, replied to the supposed voice :

‘I come!’

Steptoe turned round and asked :

‘Did you speak?’

‘I said, “I am coming.”’

‘Put on your hat, my dear fellow; you will catch cold.’

‘All right,’ returned Plainton, obeying.

They had now arrived at the end of the lawn.

‘Wait a moment while I say good-bye to

Miss Templeton,' said Plainton to his companion.

He passed through the drawing-room into the hall, where he found Kate standing alone.

'Good-bye, Kate. By the will of God, I leave Pollington in a few hours. I will not disturb the rest of the family. You can bid them farewell for me.'

Kate, who was a warm-hearted girl, looked at him with sorrowful sympathy as she said, giving him a hearty shake of the hand :

'Very well; I will tell them. Good-bye.'

Margaret had already taken the opportunity of explaining to her what had happened at the Vicarage.

'There will be a storm shortly, I think,' said Steptoe, as they walked down the road.

'There will !' rejoined Plainton, with emphasis, 'but it will not break to-night.'

Arrived at his lodgings, he found Hatter's letter awaiting him. It ran as follows :

‘The Vicarage,

‘Saturday morning.

‘MY DEAR PLAINTON,

‘I hear you have had another attack, and will not be able to preach to-morrow. It will be a great convenience, when you are going to be ill, if you will let me know a week or ten days before, in order that I may have ample time to make arrangements to supply your place. Steptoe has been here, occupying the whole of my morning with a minute description of your ailments. Another time let me know direct from yourself.

‘Ever yours,

‘ENOCH HATTER.’

‘While you are about it,’ said Margaret, laughing, ‘you might give him a list of your indispositions six months in advance.’

Plainton smiled at the ill-tempered epistle and threw it aside.

An astonishing change was observable in Plainton’s demeanour. There was an energy, decision, and resolution about his words and

movements which had not been seen for come considerable time past.

‘My first step will be to see Dr. Jolly, but I need not take either of you,’ he said.

They both insisted on accompanying him.

Dr. Jolly was in.

‘I have come, doctor, to have your deliberate opinion on my state of health.’

‘Well, everybody knows my opinion weeks ago. If the matter had been in my hands, I should have stopped you working last month. I told the Vicar to-day that it was madness to think of putting you in the pulpit to-morrow.’

‘Do you mind stating that on paper?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘As I think the time has come for me to act without consulting the Vicar any further.’

The doctor took a sheet of paper and wrote as follows :

‘Pollington,

‘June —, 18—.

‘MY DEAR MR. PLAINTON,

‘It is my duty to tell you that if you do not *at once* stop working, and take some

months' complete rest, you will run the risk of permanently injuring your health, and of marring your future usefulness.

‘It would be little short of an act of madness for you to attempt to preach again until your health is re-established. I have before told you that you ought to do much less head-work. You have been trying to do more than any one man's strength can accomplish, and unless you give up immediately and relieve your mind of its present dangerous strain, I will not answer for the consequences.

‘It is a duty you owe to yourself, as well as to others, to do all that lies in your power to preserve your health and to prolong your life. If, after this warning, you continue to do as you have been doing for so long past without first taking an entire rest for some considerable period, I think you will be wilfully sacrificing the one and shortening the other.

‘Believe me,

‘Very faithfully yours,

‘ROWLAND JOLLY, M.D.

‘The Rev. Pawley Plainton.’

Dr. Jolly handed Plainton the letter, who now rose to go.

‘You must have a glass of wine before you go.’

‘No, thanks. I do not need it.’

‘But I say you do, and what is more, I won’t let you go out of the house till you have swallowed it.’

Plainton obeyed orders, and then said :

‘Good-bye, doctor. I thank you for all the care you have taken of me. I leave Pollington to-morrow morning.’

‘Good - bye,’ rejoined the good - hearted fellow. ‘I am only sorry you should have to go like this.’

Plainton stepped into the drawing-room, where he found Mrs. Jolly.

‘I have come to say good-bye, Mrs. Jolly. Don’t forget me,’ he added, with tremulous voice, as he warmly shook hands with her.

‘We are not likely to do that,’ returned the doctor’s wife, who had a very tender heart, and was as well a woman of sterling common sense.

‘What are you going to do now?’ said Margaret, when the three were outside again.

‘I must see Fred Monmouth before I leave. It is now half-past ten,’ looking at his watch, ‘I shall most likely find him up.’

Fred Monmouth was in his dining-room, looking over some examination papers. Plainton explained all that had happened. He deeply sympathised with the curate, and after some conversation as to his next step, they parted.

Steptoe also said good-bye here, with many hearty wishes for his companion’s welfare.

Plainton and his sister then returned to their lodgings. He immediately sat down and wrote another letter of resignation to Hatter, enclosing a copy of the doctor’s letter, for he would not trust the original, as he felt sure that Hatter would destroy or keep it.

In his letter he stated that he could no longer attempt to do his work; that he had discharged all the duties entrusted to him up

to the present time, but that it had been done at a great cost ; that he felt he ought to try to preserve his life if possible ; and he concluded by offering to defray any expense which the Vicar might have to incur in immediately supplying his place.

He then wrote to the bishop, stating that he had resigned, and enclosing Dr. Jolly's own letter to justify the step.

Having done this he retired to rest, and slept with a light conscience. Now his way was so clear, and his line of duty so distinct, his mind was relieved of a great weight. Tomorrow he would go to his youngest sister's in Regent's Park, and there rest for a while. There was not time to write to her first, so he would have to take his chance of finding her at home.

Such sweet slumber had not visited his eyes for months past. He had slept for some hours without any restlessness, when he was awakened by the sound of some one singing. It was a clear, pathetic voice, with an unearthly tone of sad sweetness. Surely

he had heard that voice before—yet it could not be—was he dreaming? Somewhat moved he raised himself on his arm, and leaning his head on his hand, listened intently. There could be no doubt about the matter now. Mona was singing to him.

He had long been of opinion that occasionally, for special purposes, the blessed dead are allowed to visit their friends on earth. Our Lord says there is a great gulf fixed between the righteous and the wicked in Hades, but He does not say there is any gulf fixed between the former and the earth. The Scriptures, on the contrary, afford some instances of the departed revisiting the scenes and persons known to them before Death bore them away.

He believed that he himself was now vouchsafed a proof of this theory. How her sweet voice thrilled his heart! And with what rapt feelings did he drink in her simple words of comfort and peace!

He sat up in his bed and opening his eyes looked round his room. He could just dis-

cover the dim outlines of the furniture. But in the corner farthest from him he discerned a fine point of light. He watched it with breathless interest. It gradually grew larger, and appeared to approach him. The singing still continued, but was increased in volume by a chorus of voices softly chanting the following refrain :

‘ Soldier ! fight on
Till the battle is won,
Not yet can rest come !
Not yet.’

The curate bowed his head in obedient assent till the strain ceased. Raising it again, he was startled to find the room filled with light. Gazing around in amazement, he saw that some one was sitting on the side of the bed near the foot and looking towards him. It was Mona. Instinctively stretching out his arms towards her he tried to clasp her. But she, smiling gently, said in a soft, low tone, ‘ Not yet ! ’ and gradually disappeared. The light faded away, and he was left alone.

He thought he would get up and see what

time it was. Before the thought could be realised in action, a deep slumber stole upon him, and when he woke again it was broad daylight. He vividly recalled the dream within a dream of the previous night. He did not doubt that though it was an illusion, resulting from the overwrought condition of the brain, he might draw a lesson from it. He would take courage, and continue to fight on with resolution and patience, whatever trials might await him, until he was called to his rest.



CHAPTER XI.

DREAMS.

WHEN he rose in the calm, bright, early morning, he remembered that it was Trinity Sunday. What trials and experiences he had undergone since on that day ten years back he had received the grace of Holy Orders. He had expected then, in the innocence of his heart, to find his elders in the ministry men of Apostolic life and manners, spiritual, devoted, hard-working, prayerful, scrupulously honourable, generous, tender-hearted ; able, through the sanctity dwelling within them, almost to work miracles, and to speak words of infallible wisdom and truth.

How grievously had he been disappointed !

Selfishness, narrow-mindedness, unbelief, ambition, avarice, jealousy, hatred, vindictiveness—these had been the ruling characteristics of most of the men with whom his lot had been cast. But never had he seen these qualities exhibited with such persistency and in such intensity as in the man he had now quitted, who, in addition to these peculiarities, never pretended to do a stroke of parish-work. For during the whole time Plainton had held the curacy he had never known the Vicar to visit a single sick case.

Well, he had done with him now, until the Judgment Day. May God bring him to a knowledge of his true condition before that dread trial!

He put together a few necessaries, and, accompanied by Margaret, walked down to the railway station. There Margaret said ‘good-bye,’ as she was to remain in Pollington some few weeks longer to pack up her brother’s books, to keep an eye on Hatter’s movements, and to contradict his ingenious calumnies.

Plainton took the first train he could get to town, and then hastened on to Regent's Park. When he came to the house he knocked at the door and rang the bell. In a few moments the servant came.

‘Is Mrs. Fitzgerald at home?’

‘No, sir, they are both at Brighton, and will not be back till to-morrow. Will you come in, sir?’

‘Do you know me?’

‘Yes, sir,’ said the girl, with a smile: ‘you are Mrs. Fitzgerald’s brother.’

‘Oh! very well; then I will come in.’

He went into the drawing-room and opened the window which faced the park.

How still everything was; how silent the house! He felt as if he had been engaged in some terrific struggle against overwhelming odds, and had barely conquered, but was sorely wounded.

As he leaned against the casement and looked over the park, his thoughts took another turn. He gazed dreamily before him and lost all knowledge of his surroundings. He

was again a youth wandering along the sea-shore at Brightsand Bay. The sun is shining ; the sea looks tempting ; he soon strips and plunges in. According to his wont he swims a long way out, and floats luxuriously on the waves.

Suddenly a squall comes on, the billows rise quickly, and he makes for the shore. He takes to his long side-stroke, and at first dashes bravely through the waters. After a time he turns his head towards shore, to see how near it is. He appears to have made but little progress. He changes his position, and for a while tries a full breast-stroke, but is obliged very soon to go back to his usual form. The waves are now very rough, and the breakers continually dash against his face. He puts forth more strength, and bravely, almost defiantly, strikes out against the furrows.

He at last nears the shore, but can hardly hold out. The breakers close in, are filled with shingle, which bruises his head and body. Another effort, another brave stroke, and his

foot has touched the ground. But at that moment a large curling billow takes him up as a giant would a child, and drags him back into the deep. But the shore has been touched once, and must be again. He perseveres, and at last, plunging his hands into the shingle, drags his bleeding, bruised body out of reach of the enemy.

Plainton had followed the course of his thoughts with intense eagerness, and now stood in front of the open casement, with clenched hands, flashing eye, mouth firmly shut, and his breast heaving and panting with the imaginary struggle. Suddenly coming to himself again, he smiled and said :

‘I am out of the waters now.’

Lifting his face reverently upwards, he ejaculated :

‘Thou, O God, hast drawn me out of the deep, and delivered me out of the hand of my cruel enemy !’

He knelt down, his head fell on his breast, and crossing his arms, as was his wont in

prayer, he sought strength and consolation where he had led so many others to seek them. The fresh early summer breeze blew upon him, and the bright sun streamed across his head. We may hardly intrude on so sacred a scene. The restrained and pent-up feelings of months burst their barrier, and tears which God in mercy sent streamed down his careworn face. His intense communion was almost silent. Broken sentences occasionally escaped from his trembling lips :

‘ O Christ !—Master—whom I love above all things, and desire to serve—help me—make me strong and brave, like Thyself !—Forgive those who have wronged me—Give me Thy peace——’

At last he was silent, his lips only moved. Now, as his burdened heart was eased, he grew calm.

The next day he received the following affectionate epistle from Hatter, in answer to the one he had posted at Pollington on the previous Saturday night :

‘The Vicarage, Pollington.

‘June —, 18—.

‘MY DEAR PLAINTON,

‘I need not tell you how sincerely I lament your decision, necessary though I fear it to be. How deeply do I deplore your ill-health, brought on in a great measure, no doubt, through over-anxiety on behalf of a godless and worldly people ! I shall still try and keep a place open for you, in case you should find it possible in the course of a few months to rejoin our staff. Under the circumstances, it would be cruel (as well as useless) to tie you down to the legal necessity of giving three months’ notice. So pray consider yourself at liberty, either now, or at the end of July, or at any time you think best. Perhaps you could manage, with an effort, to wait till the end of July.

‘Foolish people will attempt, in their mistaken kindness, to get up exciting demonstrations and leave-takings, which will do you more harm than many sermons. I trust we

may be able to raise a substantial token of our regard for you. And possibly in a month or two you may be well enough to come back for a few hours, and, without risk to your health, receive and respond to the genuine marks of affectionate esteem which will await you.

‘I shall see the bishop to-morrow, my dear Plainton, and will speak to him about you, so as to save the necessity of your writing to him to announce your departure. Letter-writing will only fatigue and excite you, and should be avoided as far as possible. It is your duty to consider how much we all are interested in your well-being. Speaking for myself, I may say that I have not had a moment’s peace since receiving your melancholy note, so anxious have I been as to your condition.

‘Perhaps I may be able to meet you on Wednesday. Come to luncheon. Mrs. Hatter and Hetty would like so much to see you before you go. I wish, also, to make you a little present of some calomel pills and

a bottle of cod-liver oil (very pure and nourishing).

‘How greatly will your apostolic work be missed in Pollington !

‘Make an effort to come to luncheon. Take a fly, if necessary, and charge it to me both ways (2s.).

‘Believe me,

‘My dear Plainton,

‘Your very faithful and deeply-grieved friend,

‘ENOCH HATTER.’

The letter was characteristic and amusing. The Vicar, finding that Plainton had taken the matter of leaving into his own hands at last, acquiesced with as good a grace as he could. The curate wondered if Hatter would have found out that it would be cruel to keep him any longer, if he had not also discovered that it would be useless.

Plainton smiled at the broad hint that he should still wait till the end of July, and also at the cunning attempt to prevent him from communicating directly with the bishop. But

the most amusing point in the letter was the familiar invitation to luncheon ; an invitation to breakfast or luncheon being, as our readers have already seen, the invaluable drug on which Hatter had always relied for hocussing his curate.

Plainton, acting on Hatter's advice with regard to letter-writing, left his epistle unanswered.

Whilst we are speaking of letters it will be convenient to mention here that before the end of the week the late curate of Pollington also received the following communication from Mrs. Templeton, he having previously written to Ethel to bid her good-bye, as he did not see her on the night before his abrupt departure.

‘ The Old Manor House,
‘ Pollington.

‘ DEAR MR. PLAINTON,

‘ I am very sorry to hear of your ill health, that you have quite left Pollington, and are not likely to return. Mr. Hatter frequently told me that it had been arranged

with the bishop that you should succeed him here, and I am much surprised to find that it is not to be so. I have now to make a very particular request, and that is that you will cease writing to Ethel, and, indeed, to any of the girls. I think your last letter to her is of a more affectionate character than is usual amongst acquaintances, and would be likely to put foolish thoughts into her head. I have, therefore, not let her have it. Ethel is but a child to you, and a man of your years would not of course think of proposing to one so much younger than himself. Had you become Vicar of Pollington, as I fully expected, matters might have been different. But as I now understand from Mr. Hatter, who called this morning, that you are not likely to receive preferment, having no friends in the Church, and not being related to any bishop ; that you have no private means nor any expectations, and that your health is completely broken up and cannot be restored, I think it would be as well that you should cease to hold intercourse with the girls.

‘ At the same time I wish you every happiness and success in your new work. If it is true that you are going to Hampshire, I hope you will make up your mind to stay there. Why should you return ? It is a beautiful county ; there are lovely walks there, and the work, I should think, would quite suit you. You will be much happier there than in Surrey, or in the neighbourhood of the metropolis.

‘ I am sure I need not do more than ask you to observe my request with regard to letters.

‘ Believe me,

‘ Yours sincerely,

‘ FRANCES G. TEMPLETON.’

Plainton did not blame the writer so much as the Vicar, who had evidently found out the mother’s weak side, and, according to his wont, made use of it to suit his own scheming purposes. Mrs. Templeton was not more sordid than other mothers who have daughters to dispose of. She was anxious to get them all married comfortably, and with as little

expense and trouble as possible. To this end she had always made the unmarried clergy free of her house, and had been particularly civil to Plainton.

But now the poor fellow had one leg in the grave and very nearly the other, and had besides nothing to live on except what he could earn as curate, it was quite hopeless to allow the intimacy to go on any longer, especially as he was leaving the neighbourhood and could not possibly be of further use to them in keeping up the reputation of the house by his visits. Further, if he himself had any feeling towards one of the girls, it was more merciful to put him out of his misery at once than to let him linger on with the precarious hope of one day being able to marry her. Long engagements, at the best, were always doubtful affairs; very often they issued in unhappiness to both parties, and not unfrequently ruined a girl's prospects for life by leaving her hopelessly single after all.

To return. Plainton had received a hearty welcome from his sister Lilian and her hus-

band, on their return on the Monday from Brighton.

Lilian was his youngest sister. She was born when he was a boy of twelve years, and he had always regarded her as *his* baby. He had nursed her, sung her to sleep when she was in bed, and brought her downstairs on his back in the morning. He had vowed to himself that he would bring her up to be 'the most splendid woman in England.' His method of education was somewhat peculiar, if not wholly original. He used to balance her on one hand at arm's length, throw her up to the ceiling and catch her round the waist as she descended. He would lie on his back, and lifting one foot into the air place her across it at the imminent risk of breaking her back.

To develop her courage and hardihood he would take her out of her bed in the early morning and hold her by her little ankles over a half empty water-butt, letting her down till her head touched the water. He taught her to run, jump, swim, and play cricket. In later years he had striven to influence her

character, and in his birthday letters besought her to meet all the vicissitudes of life with fortitude, patience, and courage.

Amongst other useful things, he had taught her how to travel with the least possible amount of luggage, and it is doubtful if any Englishwoman ever went about the world with fewer packages, and more comfort, than did Lilian. She had started for Italy, Nubia, and America, with a single box and a bunch of flowers.

So much had she profited by her brother's instructions, that on her wedding-day, already referred to in connection with Hatter's gentlemanly behaviour, he could boast to her happy husband that the wife he was about to take home was able to go round the world with nothing more cumbersome than a moderately-sized carpet-bag.

Lilian was somewhat surprised to see her brother, but made no remark upon it, except one of satisfaction at his arrival. He briefly explained to her his position, but very little was said about it, as she saw it was a painful

matter, and that he was not equal to much conversation.

The providential isolation and repose he had enjoyed while waiting the return of Lilian and Mr. Fitzgerald, had been most beneficial to him, and he walked out into the park feeling a quietude and peace to which he had been long a stranger.

But during the next few days a peculiar feeling came over him. Although letters were forwarded to him from Pollington, and his sister kept him posted up in the parish news, he felt he was removed to an immeasurable distance from his late parish. There seemed an impassable barrier between him and it. He missed the faces of the many kind friends he had known there. He was in fact bereaved. He was cut off from the family God had given him. He had now no children to speak to. He had known all the children in Pollington. Over three hundred used to gather together to meet him at the monthly children's service. They sang hymns of his choosing. They listened to his

teaching, answered to his catechising, and heard with rapt attention his stories and allegories. Suddenly he had been snatched away from all this, not for a time only, but for ever. He knew it must be so. He knew that his life had hung upon his instant departure, but the blow was hard to bear. He walked up and down the park, and looked wistfully in the face of each child he met. Little dots toddling about the grass gazed up wonderingly at him, for a moment, and laughed; then chatted ^Rfeely with him, as if they had known him ever since they had been born. This, however, was no new experience, for wherever Plainton walked, and children met him, they invariably looked up and greeted him as if he were an old friend.

One day, when the sense of bereavement was very strong upon him, he walked for hours alone, and returned to his sister's quite exhausted.

‘I don’t think, dear, that you should walk quite so much,’ said she, remarking his pale face and preternaturally bright eye.

‘No, I ought not. I shall rest—soon.’

He went to bed, and did not sleep at first. His head was hot, and he found a difficulty in fixing his thoughts. Odd and incongruous images jumbled themselves together, and refused to be controlled.

Presently he dreamed he was walking on the road to Pollington. He toiled on and on, but could not reach it. He could see the river and the houses, but they receded as fast as he advanced. Now at last they ceased to move away, and he tried to walk on towards them, but his feet refused to obey. He was immovably fixed.

By one of those strange changes which so frequently take place in dreams, he suddenly found Pollington in the air above him. Familiar faces looked over the edge at him, familiar voices sounded in the air. He spoke to those he saw, but they looked at him vacantly, and did not answer. He shouted again and again, but no one knew him. He caught at last the attention of one old man’s face.

‘I am Plainton the curate,’ he shouted.

The old man shook his head feebly, as he replied in a sing-song tone :

‘ He left ages ago—ages ago—ages———’

Suddenly a great crash was heard, the whole village came tumbling upon him, and he was buried in the ruins.

This catastrophe woke him. He looked round the room ; it was just getting light.

‘ How my head throbs, and I am so thirsty. I will go to Pollington this morning and see the children.’

He dozed again. When he opened his eyes, Lilian was standing looking at him.

‘ You have had a bad night, I am afraid.’

‘ Did I make a noise ?’

‘ Dreadful !’

‘ I am going to Pollington after breakfast to see the children.’

‘ You had better not, dear.’

‘ I must see the children.’

‘ What children ?’

‘ *My* children ; *all* the children. My head is so bad.’

‘ Lie still a little while.’

She brought him some breakfast. Then he dozed again. He talked incessantly about the children during his waking moments.

In the afternoon Mr. Fitzgerald asked Dr. Churchill to come and see him. After a long visit and many inquiries, the doctor said his nerves had apparently received a great shock, and he left instructions for him to be kept quiet and carefully watched.

Plainton was very ill, but happily he did not know it. He entered into a world of his own, undisturbed by outward circumstances. He was wandering by the river again, listening to its ripples, watching the fish as they darted at the flies. Now he was lying down in Brackley Park, and looking at the bright clouds. He rambled over hill and dale, finding fresh beauties at every step. He could never tire of this——

‘But night is coming on, my children,’ he suddenly exclaimed; ‘we must hasten back. Come, Mona! come, Ethel! where are you?’ he asked, in plaintive tones.

He passed away from river and fields, and

flowers. He is at work in his parish again——

‘ “Come unto Me all ye that labour and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.” Will no one come? What! toil on till ye drop beneath your burden into the grave? What! set your hearts on worldly wealth and earthly luxury, and reject the true riches and the heavenly crown? No, no! Come, weary ones! Come—— Will no one come?——’

He visits the home of the sick and dying. He talks and prays with them. He holds cottage lectures and mission services——

‘ But darkness has set in, and we have forgotten the lamps! Come again, when it is light!——’

He is in church catechising. His beloved children are gathered around him. He tells them new stories and anecdotes. While he is talking to them a thunderstorm bursts over the church. His voice is drowned amid the roar. The children cower down beneath the seats, and disappear. There is a great thunder-

clap—the church is gone, and he is standing without cover in the pitiless rain——

‘ I must go back and find the children——’

He has one further experience in this strange, inner world of consciousness. He has done with earth. He is dead. With interest and eagerness he wanders amid the peaceful abodes of departed spirits. It is not very different from earth. There are fields and flowers, rivers and skies. There is only no wind. It is always a perfect calm.

‘ I wonder where Mona is ! She must be here somewhere—perhaps resting under some tree, or walking through some shady grove——’

He seeks her everywhere; but cannot find her. He comes to a river. Why, there is Pollington opposite ! How strange ! So close, too ! He scans eagerly the opposite bank——

‘ Yes. There are Kate and Ethel and Lilian !’ He calls to them, but they do not answer. He is afraid they will turn away without seeing him. He keeps pace with them along the bank. Although they often

look over, they do not seem to recognise him. He comes to the ferry and quickly passes over. He calls them :

‘ Kate ! Ethel ! Lilian ! ’

The last turns round and looks at him. As she does so, river and field disappear. He is left alone with her. He is in his bedroom, and his eye rests on hers.

‘ I am so glad ! ’ said she, kissing him.

‘ I have been ill,’ he remarked feebly.

‘ Yes, but you are much better now,’ rejoined his sister, cheerily.

He took a little nourishment, and after a few minutes went off into a sound slumber. From that moment he rapidly grew well again. As soon as he was equal to the fatigue he was removed to the seaside. He chose Margate for a time, as the air there he had found more beneficial than at any other place. Thence he went to Hampshire, and received a hearty welcome from his friend Cumberland.



CHAPTER XII.

THE VICAR'S TACTICS.

THE Vicar soon set Mrs. Chine and Miss Piggott to work to inoculate the parish with the carefully-prepared information he gave them about Plainton, but none of his patients would take it; and instead, an extremely angry feeling began to manifest itself, which boded ill for the peace of the Hatters.

He then wrote some letters to a few whom he thought he could best influence, in which, whilst professing the utmost attachment to his late curate, he covertly advanced, with many compassionate expressions, somewhat serious charges against his work and character. One of these epistles was forwarded to

Plainton by the recipient a few days after the curate had left Pollington, and this, when compared with the affectionate letter of the Vicar's we have already quoted, he found a curious study.

Amongst other efforts to propitiate himself with his people, Hatter called on the Broughams and the Monmouths, and assured them that he gave no instructions to Plainton about the Christmas decorations, but that the arrangement by which they were excluded was entirely his own. Our readers will remember a conversation he had with his late curate, in which he had ascertained that the former had nothing on the matter in the Vicar's handwriting. He therefore felt quite safe in taking this course. Miss Monmouth wrote to Plainton to know if she might authoritatively deny this statement of the Vicar's. The curate felt bound to defend his public acts, and accordingly replied by simply stating without comment the instructions he had received.

Hatter's plan of meeting this letter was

characteristic in the extreme. He wrote to Miss Monmouth a long letter, in which he deeply lamented that Mr. Plainton's 'cerebral malady' had so grossly impaired his memory, or he never would have written the letter to Miss Monmouth, divulging the instructions he professed to have received. Further, he wondered how any one could believe it possible that the Vicar could do such an act as that ascribed to him.

Miss Monmouth declining to take this view of the matter, as not being borne out by what Plainton had told her six or seven months back, Hatter wrote another letter, which would have been amusing if it had not been so wicked, in which he stated that what Miss Monmouth mentioned only confirmed his own view, for it showed that their dear friend's 'cerebral malady' was of much longer standing than he had supposed. Had he known the nature of Plainton's illness when he left England, he certainly would not have left him in charge. He concluded with a humble apology for the annoyance which had been

inflicted on Miss Monmouth by the late curate in the Vicar's name.

The incredible baseness and cruelty of this letter astonished even the Vicar's worst enemies. Of course, no one believed for a moment a single word of it. Hatter's whole life in Pollington had been made up of innumerable acts of meanness and untruthfulness. He was known and judged by his fruits. It is doubtful if he really thought to convince Miss Monmouth of his sincerity and guilelessness by these letters ; but, in writing them, he consistently acted on the acknowledged motto of his life, to say or do anything which would help to confute or silence an adversary.

He, and Mrs. Hatter also, made persistent and violent efforts to propitiate the Broughams ; for Miss Brougham's brother was an intimate friend of Lord Greyling's, and there was just the possibility that the scandal the Vicar had created might reach the ears of that nobleman, in which case Hatter might have to defend his conduct,

for fear the living—to obtain which he had schemed, married, changed his political opinions, preached sermons of a particular theological tendency, and published popular pamphlets—might, after all his plotting, go astray.

The letters to Miss Monmouth fell into the hands of Mr. Fitzgerald, who earnestly begged Plainton to allow him to take them into a court of law, as they were calculated to injure the curate irremediably in his profession.

‘Your brains are your tools,’ said he, ‘and if this unscrupulous man is allowed to state that they are hopelessly diseased, and therefore worthless, he is taking away your livelihood.’

Plainton resolutely declined this offer.

‘I leave Hatter,’ he rejoined, ‘in the hands of Almighty God. There is One that judgeth.’

When he heard of the angry feeling which the Vicar’s acts had excited in Pollington, he wrote to Margaret, urging her to use her utmost efforts to discourage it, and to show

Hatter that generosity of which he himself seemed so incapable.

We will mention but one more of these petty incidents.

In a previous chapter we stated how Plainton had written a letter of resignation to the Vicar at a time of great mental depression and physical exhaustion. He had spoken despairingly of his work at Pollington. He laid bare the inmost feelings of his heart. It was marked 'private,' and was a letter such as in ordinary life would be treated with tenderness and reverence, as being the outcome of great mental agony.

When Hatter found that the parish was growing rapidly warmer on the subject of his treatment of Plainton, he made a casual call on Mr. Chubb. After manifesting great interest in Mr. Chubb's latest piscatorial exploits, he began to speak of their 'dear friend Plainton.'

'So sorry to find his brain is affected to the extent it is,' he remarked.

'Oh! is that it? I had no notion that

was the case. Though, now I come to think of it, his sermons were awfully hot and strong of late, and what you say would account for it.'

'Yes ; unfortunately, it is too true. Hereditary disease : he would have had it wherever he had been.'

'Hereditary !' exclaimed Chubb. 'Whew !'

'Yes, from his mother, poor dear fellow. He told me himself that she was attacked every two or three years.'

'Poor fellow !' said Chubb, who was really a kind-hearted man, and personally did not dislike the Curate.

'Here, you will see from this letter the condition he was in.'

And Hatter pulled out Plainton's letter of resignation.

Chubb read it, and remarked :

'Ah ! I see. Yes, he must have been a good way gone to write that.'

Hatter was delighted with the success of his kindly mission thus far, and called next on John Bridge, who, according to his wont,

had been calling a spade a spade in speaking of Hatter's late doings.

Hatter talked for a long time of indifferent matters, and John Bridge began to wonder as to the object of the unexpected honour he had received. Presently the Vicar pulled out Plainton's letter, as before.

John Bridge glanced at it, and handed it back. Then, looking at his visitor with his two glowing eyes, he said :

‘ Look here, Vicar. Who told you I was a fool ?’

‘ Eh—eh—I don't see the relevancy——’

‘ Who told you I was a fool ?’—in a much louder tone.

‘ Eh—eh—I do not know what you mean.’

‘ I know what *you* mean ! That letter is private—it is marked private ; and if it were not, it is on a private and sacred matter. Now in ordinary life—in lay life, Vicar, it would be considered—well, a breach of confidence and unprofessional, to put it very lightly, to show to a third person such a letter as that. I should have thought that wholesome rule

would have held with additional force amongst the clergy——’

‘You are showing a very unchristian spirit to reflect like that on your Vicar,’ whined Hatter, and hastily departed. He hurried back to the Vicarage, and went through the saltatory performances customary to him when vexed. Since Plainton had left he had already kicked out one of the panels in the drawing-room door, and broken two writing-tables.

He slammed to the door, and stood for a few seconds on one leg looking excitedly at his wife, who readily guessed what was the matter.

‘Enoch ! Enoch ! pray calm yourself.’

But Hatter had already begun dancing and throwing his arms about. Having run round the table two or three times, and tossed the books about which were lying on it, he suddenly took up a large writing-case and hurled it at Mrs. Hatter, who, with practised skill and characteristic grace, ducked, and the missile went into the fire-place.

Lastly, throwing himself on the ground, he kicked his heels on the carpet for some minutes, when his faithful wife advanced as usual with a bottle of eau-de-Cologne and poured it on his head.

‘This terrible persecution,’ groaned Hatter, ‘will be the death of me!’

‘You will soon be quit of the horrid place now. Who has been at you to-day?’

‘Bridge—John Bridge!’

‘You might be sure he would. See how he scowls at us both in church every Sunday.’

‘I will keep out of his way in future. He is the most cantankerous man in the parish.’

This was one of the few promises the Vicar religiously observed.

Steptoe had sent in his resignation the week after Plainton had left; but Hatter, although secretly enraged, and vowing to ‘take it out’ of him by-and-by, had used every effort to induce him to remain. Steptoe was immovable; he would not entertain the notion for a moment. He came to Pollington, he said, to

assist Plainton, and did not care to remain there with any one else.

Hatter invited him to breakfast, and tried his unctuous and flattering drugs, but all to no purpose.

They were talking in the dining-room. Presently Hatter told Hetty to take Mr. Steptoe a bunch of flowers. Steptoe arose, and looking indignantly at his Vicar, said :

‘Mr. Hatter, you ought to have more manliness than to attempt by the aid of your child to make me go against my conscience.’

Hatter desisted. But he still relied on breakfasts and luncheons, together with flattery and the mature charms of Mrs. Hatter, to bring Steptoe round to his way of thinking. The curate was like a stone, perfectly unimpressionable.

Hatter made all kinds of wild offers to be fulfilled in the future ; and entreated, with tears in his eyes, that Steptoe would not leave him. Steptoe was still unmoved. Hatter hoped, by persistently hanging on to him, that he would at last make him give way,

and again invited him to breakfast 'to talk matters over.'

Steptoe sent back a note, in which he stated that he would prefer to talk business in the vestry, and would rather get his meals at home.

On the receipt of this letter, Hatter had another of his most violent paroxysms.

Finding, at length, that his new curate meant what he said, and would on no consideration remain with him, Hatter changed his tactics. He devised petty annoyances and covert insults, with which he favoured Steptoe as opportunity offered. He went further. Without committing himself in any way, he informed his curate that he had overheard it said that he had been seen in the company of dissolute women—'no doubt it could be explained, but the facts observed looked very awkward.'

On investigating the charge, Steptoe found that it arose from his having walked home from a cricket-match rather late one evening with two of the Sunday school teachers. Mrs. Chine had seen him, and mentioned it to the

Vicar' in her weekly report. Hatter's imagination and vindictiveness supplied the colouring.

It was clear, from the letters which Plainton received from Steptoe, that the pestilent and unscrupulous spitefulness of the Vicar was at length beginning to tell even on his herculean constitution ; and it became evident that if he had to remain much longer in Pollington, Mr. Hatter would accomplish his apparent intention of breaking up his health before he could get away.

Meanwhile Hatter, finding his own position in the parish intolerable, sent the following letter to Dr. Cartwright, to whom, as being an old-fashioned Evangelical of simple life and fervent piety, he was somewhat more diffuse than was usual in his epistolary intercourse :—

‘ The Vicarage, Pollington.

‘ August —, 18—.

‘ MY DEAR SIR,

‘ I much regret to find from your last letter that your health has not been all

that could be wished. I trust, however, that when you quit the Rectory, complete repose and a change to a more suitable climate may restore your strength.

‘I am sorry to say that the weather at Pollington has been very trying to me this year, especially of late. We have had one or two severe storms, and the air still continues to be hot and oppressive—far too much so to agree with my constitution. I fear I shall not be able to stand it much longer, and shall be compelled to seek a cooler and more bracing atmosphere. Yet I cannot bear the thought of separating myself from my beloved people, amongst whom I have dwelt as a shepherd with his flock so many happy years. My poor wife weeps day and night at the bare contemplation of leaving those dear ones amongst whom we have ministered—not wholly in vain. My two churchwardens, who have seconded all my efforts with the most praiseworthy zeal, have both taken to their beds since I mentioned the probability of my receiving another call. And every morning

crowds of weeping parishioners surround the Vicarage-gate, hoping to hear that the design of leaving them has been abandoned.

‘How inscrutable are the decrees of Providence! My heart and affections are entirely bound up with this people, but He who holdeth all things in the hollow of His Hand hath said, “Move on!” and we can only obey. Alas! it is indeed true in our case that “here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.”’

‘Should you feel disposed to entertain my proposals for an earlier resignation of the Rectory, I shall be glad to have a line to that effect.

‘Believe me,

‘Very sincerely yours,

‘ENOCH HATTER.’



CHAPTER XIII.

‘THEY HAVE THEIR REWARD.’

As soon as Plainton had left the parish, the principal members of the congregation formed themselves into a committee for the purpose of raising a testimonial for the late curate. Mr. Hatter went into several rages when he heard of it, notwithstanding what he had said in his letter to his curate on the very same matter. The design made rapid progress.

The subscribers, remembering what had happened the last time they had presented a testimonial to Plainton, would not permit the final step to be taken until they had learnt

that the Vicar had paid him the balance of stipend due when he left.

‘We don’t mind subscribing our money,’ said Mr. Manley, ‘but we are not going to let what is meant for the curate go to swell the Vicar’s balance at his banker’s, as it did on a former occasion.’

So little did the people trust Hatter’s honesty, that, fearing he would not pay Plainton the sum he owed him if the testimonial were presented first, they actually sent the churchwardens to him as a deputation to know if all pecuniary matters were settled between him and the late curate. As the question was asked in the vestry, the vestry-door and table suffered considerably in consequence, for Hatter went off into one of his paroxysms of anger, which were of late very frequent. This was the more painful to those who witnessed the display, as it took place immediately after the celebration.

Hatter had taken off his cassock when the fit came on. Having thrown the alms-dish through the vestry window, and his hat into

Mr. Manley's face, he played his accustomed tattoo on the door with his feet, and on the table with his hands. Having overturned the table, he rushed to the Vicarage in his shirt-sleeves, where he was duly received by Mrs. Hatter with a bottle of eau-de-Cologne.

Hatter's wrath had been kindled, not only by the question of the churchwardens, but by disappointment at the thought that he would, in all probability, have to pay Plainton what he owed him. As the latter had not written, he was greatly in hopes that he did not intend to apply for his stipend. There was no real difficulty in his settling the matter if he had wished to do so, as he saw Margaret in the parish nearly every day, and knew where she was lodging.

At length, in answer to a pressing letter from John Bridge, Plainton wrote to Hatter. It was a short, civil note, simply giving his address, and stating that he intended to visit Pollington shortly. He was now in the Isle of Wight, and was gradually recovering his health and spirits.

In a few days he received an answer. There were one or two persons staying in the same house with Plainton who knew something of Hatter, and were acquainted with his handwriting. Plainton handed the letter to one of them, and requested him to read it aloud. He read as follows :

‘The Vicarage, Pollington.

‘August —, 18—.

‘SIR,—I enclose a cheque for the sum which I suppose is due to you. If you claim more, let me know, and you shall be satisfied. As I have been accused of intending to swindle you out of the present I generously made to defray the expenses of your journey to Southend, I must, when you are satisfied, require from you a written acknowledgment that you have received from me all sums which you consider to be due to you.

‘You have repaid my benevolence and unbounded kindness by base treachery of the deepest dye. I question whether Judas could be counted as having equalled your criminality.

You have dared to make known the instructions I gave you at Christmas with regard to the church decorators, and have thereby proved me a liar. I have been mistaken in you. I thought you would have borne with Christian meekness any charges which might be made against you, and not have manifested the intensely worldly spirit of defending your character. I shall not reproach you. I shall forgive you. I shall not speak a single harsh word, for I write in the deepest sorrow. Nevertheless, your conduct has been scandalous, and, considering my position and office as Vicar, in a measure blasphemous.

‘ All the good you may have effected during the years you have been here is now destroyed for ever by your baseness and treachery. I desire you to think of this sleeping and waking. And if the hell within you be half as hot as Pollington is at this present moment, you will bitterly repent of your gross wickedness in sackcloth and ashes.

‘ May your soul be saved at the last, “yet so as by fire!” In your present condition I

consider it extremely doubtful. I am not angry. I have already forgiven your outrageous, abominable, and diabolical behaviour. Nothing that you can do in this world or the next will ever atone for the mischief you have done.

‘ Believe me, in a truly Christian spirit,
‘ Your faithful and affectionate friend,
‘ ENOCH HATTER.’

‘ It is a wonderful composition,’ exclaimed the reader, who had heard Plainton’s story from Cumberland. ‘ I should preserve it, if I were you ; you will be sure to find it useful some day, especially as Hatter is not altogether an unknown man.’

Had this letter come at a time when Plainton had still any regard or respect for Hatter, or the least lingering belief in his honour or honesty, it would have pained him, unless the blind extravagance of the writer had defeated his object. As it was, he knew it was the envenomed shaft of a thwarted, angry man, and it fell harmlessly on the

breastplate of a good conscience. It seemed a happy coincidence that the chapter of the '*Imitation*' which in regular order fell to that night's private reading, was the 12th of Book II. : 'Of the Royal Way of the Holy Cross.'

He sent Hatter's letter to Fred Monmouth, who returned it with a long comment, in which he said :

'The whole thing is simply outrageous. A and B have a conversation, in which A gives B some orders to convey to C. B conveys them as he understands them. A, some months after, writes to C, saying, I never gave such orders. B, hearing of this, says, in self-defence, I received definite orders to say what I did. Then A turns round upon B and says, You are divulging a confidential communication. I think this is quite a fair statement of the case.'

Plainton also took the opinion on it of a great friend of his, the vicar of the neighbouring parish to Pollington—a God-fearing and able man, who wrote a very kind and sympathetic note, in which he said :

‘I am ashamed of the order to which I belong, to think that a member of it could write such a scandalous and scurrilous letter.’

In the following week the late curate of Pollington sent its Vicar the reply below :

‘Shanklin.

‘Aug. —, 18—.

‘REVEREND SIR,

‘I am sorry that an accurate statement of facts should cause you any inconvenience. The tone of your letter precludes me from answering it further in detail ; but you are not, therefore, by any means to suppose that I admit the justice of the language to which you give vent.

‘I deduct from your cheque the amount of stipend due to me up to the day I last preached at Pollington. I return the balance, together with the sum I received from you to defray the expense of the journey to Southend, which I undertook at your request.

‘Faithfully yours,

‘PAWLEY PLAINTON.’

Steptoe left when his time had expired, and obtained a satisfactory curacy in Yorkshire.

At length Hatter prevailed on Dr. Cartwright to retire from Cunningsstone, and, to his intense satisfaction, the living for which he had been waiting so many years, which had cost him so many sleepless nights and anxious days, and for which he had sacrificed nearly everything that is precious to an honest man, was bestowed upon him.

The last Sunday of his incumbency at Pollington arrived. The church was crowded in every part to hear his farewell sermon.

Hatter was very pale when he mounted the pulpit, and at times could scarcely be heard, because of the evident struggle he had to keep down his passion and not go off into a stamping fit. He took his text from the Book of Judges, fifth chapter, 23rd verse—‘Curse ye Meroz.’

The preacher dwelt on the circumstances under which these words were uttered. The inhabitants of Meroz had not gone forth, at the call of Deborah and Barak, to help the chosen

people to smite their enemies, but stood aloof. Therefore they were declared accursed.

‘They were slothful and selfish, they preferred their own worldly comfort to high, self-sacrificing duty; they would give up nothing on behalf of what was good and true. They were wedded to their own opinions, their own prejudices, and rejected the man and woman who had been set over them.

‘Christian friends,’ continued Hatter, after enlarging on this thought, ‘these words have a further fulfilment at the present day; for the words of Scripture have many fulfilments. I have no doubt that the writer saw in vision the circumstances which have happened in this parish, and hence he says, with emphasis, “Curse ye Meroz!”’ Here the preacher swept his arm round over the congregation.

‘The members of this congregation have deserted their lawful leader—they have despised their Vicar; they have preferred their own notions of right and wrong, of justice and injustice, to his, and so have brought

upon themselves the punishment attached to the text.

‘No parish can be properly worked unless the people in all things stand by their lawful leader. From him they must take their religion, their morality, their notions of what is good, and right, and true.

‘He will often do things which they cannot understand, and which he will prefer not to explain. But however unjust, or cruel, or dishonourable these things may seem to those who know not the whole case, if his people are truly humble and charitable, they will acquiesce in them without a murmur. But it has not been so in this unhappy and God-forsaken parish—hence says the writer of the text, “Curse ye Meroz!”’

After much more to the same purpose, he proceeded :

‘You received me with open arms; but as soon as I began humbly and dutifully to show my position as Vicar, to insist upon having my own way for your spiritual benefit, and to rebuke you for rebelliously and irreverently

remarking on my acts, you raised a clamour against me, and I have undergone—with, I trust, all Christian meekness, patience, and resignation—a persecution as hot, fierce, and relentless as any of those recorded in the history of the primitive Church, or in the first development of the blessed Reformation.

‘I cannot but rejoice that I am going away, both for your sakes as well as mine. Had I remained, I should have felt it my duty to use very strong measures to bring you to a better mind, and you probably would have resented it, and so your last state would have been worse than the first.

‘As it is, dear friends, I freely forgive you all the wrongs you have done me, and all the hard things you have said of me. I leave the task of reforming you to my unfortunate successor.

‘With these parting words of love and peace, I bid you all an affectionate farewell.’

A fortnight later each member of the congregation (who had paid up his pew-rent) received by post a printed copy of this remarkable sermon, inscribed, 'With the Rev. E. Hatter's kind remembrances and best wishes.'

So pleased and grateful were the congregation for these loving farewell words, that some of the younger members agreed to way-lay Hatter on the following morning, as soon as he should leave his house for Cunningsstone, and to put him in Burley's pond. But the wily Vicar, suspecting something of the kind, and being strongly averse from baths of any kind, managed to escape this delicate attention by quitting Pollington and his beloved parishioners before daybreak, and leaving Mrs. Hatter to follow with the luggage.

With £2000 a year, a commodious and handsome Vicarage, a well-stocked trout-stream, and excellent shooting for his wife's relations, it may be considered that 'our Vicar' *has* his reward. He has it *here*. He

has it *now*. It is all he sought : it is all he cared for. We will not begrudge it him, but will hope, rather, that he may long enjoy in peace that which he so ardently desired to possess. Let us also breathe the wish that, as the years roll on, he may learn to love something higher and more enduring.



CHAPTER XIV.

THE FIRST AND LAST KISS.

LATE in the autumn, while Plainton was at Shanklin, and a few weeks before his return to town, he received a long letter from Fortescue, who was still abroad. He wrote to say that his health was almost completely restored, and that he hoped to be in England by Christmas, when he would be glad to have Plainton's advice with regard to his undertaking lay mission-work in the East of London, under the direction of some experienced clergyman. He also proposed to establish a brotherhood of mission-workers, who should go forth into the most neglected

parts of that portion of the metropolis, and engage in systematic evangelistic work.

Plainton answered his letter at some length, and arranged to see him as soon as he should return.

We may mention here, without further particularising it, that the only successful effort on a large scale to deal with the spiritual destitution of the masses in the East End of London has been that organised and still carried on by means of the munificence of Fortescue. So successful has it been, that it has at length received the approval and sanction of the enlightened Suffragan Bishop of Wapping.

On the day fixed for the presentation to the late curate of Pollington, Plainton and Margaret returned once more to their old parish, and met the new vicar and his curate, with some of the principal parishioners, at the table of Mr. Manley.

Mr. Thornycroft would have been present, but unfortunately got lost in a fog as to the canonical regularity of the proceedings.

Hatter had retained the living of Pollington up to the last day he could legally do so, and the new vicar had not yet been put in possession.

‘Now,’ argued Thornycroft to his brother warden, ‘in the eye of the law, Hatter is still vicar, as he has not yet formally resigned the living, and his successor is, in reality, no more vicar of Pollington than you or I.’

‘What does that matter?’

‘What does it matter!’ exclaimed Thornycroft, amazed at Manley’s obtuseness, ‘why, everything! How can we put the new man in the chair as vicar when he is not vicar? It would be most unconstitutional. It would be introducing the thin end of the wedge of Radicalism and Socialism by ignoring the rights of persons and of things.’

‘But surely you don’t want to put Hatter in the chair?’

‘There’s my difficulty. As churchwarden, I ought, acting legally, to put him in it; but, as a man, I should have to kick him out immediately afterwards.’

‘But I don’t think Hatter will agree to that.’

‘I suppose not—I suppose not,’ rejoined Thornycroft, dubiously. ‘He never could see these matters in the right light. I really do not know what is to be done.’

‘I see no difficulty.’

‘Ah! but you have not studied the constitution as I have. There is nothing I can find in the ‘Canons,’ or in Brooke, or in Blackstone, which bears upon this particular point. Plainton is an excellent fellow, but I do not wish his coming back to Pollington to be used as a handle by the Rads and the Internationalists for upsetting the ancient order of things.’

‘Oh! that would be impossible with such a trifling matter.’

‘There’s the great danger. Because it is such a trifle its importance constitutionally may be overlooked. The swinging about of a dead cat may cause a revolution when everything is ripe.’

However, Thornycroft at last settled the

affair in this way. He was absent from the whole of the proceedings, but saw Plainton immediately afterwards, and assured him of his goodwill. He then explained at some length the constitutional difficulty which had prevented his more prominently appearing on the occasion.

To return. After dinner they all repaired to the schoolroom, where Plainton met most of his old friends. The new vicar took the chair, and having opened the proceedings with a short speech, Mr. Manley read a carefully-worded address to the late curate from the members of the congregation, in which they spoke in grateful terms of his work amongst them. The address, beautifully engrossed on vellum, and illuminated, was then presented to him. Next there was handed to him by the chairman a purse containing a hundred and fifty sovereigns. Lastly, a Sunday scholar placed in his hands a handsome Bible from the Sunday-school children.

After this, Dr. Jolly rose and made a characteristic speech, in which he said that as

Mr. Plainton had received the rich man's purse, he begged to offer him also the poor man's thanks. He mentioned how he had dragged the late curate out of his bed at all hours of the night to visit pressing cases, and he was sure that those whom he had tended would never forget him.

Other complimentary speeches were made.

Plainton replied in a few heartfelt words, concluding with a request that those present would remember the truths he had tried to teach them. They then all crowded round him, and he shook hands with each one.

He felt very keenly this sudden resurrection amongst his old and beloved friends. From each he had received some act of personal kindness, and he looked with affection on their eager, sympathising faces.

Harry Templeton was there, and brought him an invitation to the Manor House, which, however, he declined, much as he would have liked to see the children.

The next day he departed to his new parish, to which he had been recommended by his

former bishop, who spoke of him in very high terms, and who, Plainton afterwards discovered, knew a good deal more than he had supposed of the difficult conditions under which he had worked at Pollington.

As this story is intended to be a history of our Vicar, and not of his curate, we might very well conclude here ; but as our readers may like to know a little more of Plainton's future, we give them one or two more particulars about him.

Soon after he had settled down in his new work he wrote to Dr. Jolly, asking him to be good enough to send in his account for medical attendance upon himself and Margaret during the three years they had resided at Pollington.

In a few days he received the following extraordinary and alarming document, duly stamped :

‘ Pollington,

‘ Nov. —, 18—.

‘ Received of his Reverence, Pawley Plainton, M.A., the sum of Three Thousand

pounds, nineteen shillings, and elevenpence, for whisky, beer, pipes, tobacco, soap, candles, ginger, and blacking, Also for medical attendance during sundry attacks of *delirium tremens*.

£	s.	d.
£3,000	19	11

‘ ROWLAND JOLLY, M.D.’

Plainton acknowledged this remarkable enclosure by sending the mirth-loving and kind-hearted doctor a portrait of himself suitably mounted.

The curate found his new post a light but responsible one. Owing to local circumstances there was very little parish-work, but the preaching required care and experience.

During the two years and a half he was there he enjoyed an almost perfect peace, and a great portion of his time was devoted to meditation, reading, and prayer.

He was intensely interested in the state of ecclesiastical parties, and was much moved by

the short-sighted efforts made to restrain the lawful liberties of the Church. Although he did not agree with all that extreme men did, he deeply sympathised with them under the unjust persecution to which they were exposed.

He attended many of their meetings, and was struck by the devotion, fire, energy, faith, and self-denial which these men manifested. Amongst others, he went to a meeting of the Church League for the Separation of Church and State, but although he felt there was a great grievance to be redressed, he did not think that with his present limited knowledge of what was likely to follow on Disestablishment he could quite join the league. He thought, however, that the Church could afford to bear many losses in order to get rid of the miserable, narrow, jealous, unjust, and ignorant control of Parliament as at present constituted, with its members representing Judaism, Romanism, Heterodoxy, and Infidelity.

One day he went to St. Radigund's Church

to hear Dr. Bentley, Superior of the Milton Fathers. He had never seen him before. He was much struck by his appearance and by his preaching. His sermon was most original and quaint ; at the same time it was marked by a fervour and spirituality which strongly moved Plainton. The preacher seemed to live in the unseen world. This present lower world crumbled away as he spake, and the curate felt himself in the presence only of the great realities of the life to come. He was so deeply moved that he determined to see Father Bentley.

He accordingly wrote to him, and received a courteous reply appointing a place and hour for an interview. He had a long conversation with him on the appointed day, and was delighted beyond measure. He accepted an invitation to spend a few days at Milton, and to see for himself the working of Father Bentley's system.

At the end of his stay there he expressed a wish to join the brotherhood. The Superior was pleased to accept the offer,

and to allow Plainton to make trial of this new life. The novitiate would last two years. At the end of that time, or before, he would be at liberty to depart. But if he found the vocation suited him, and the Superior were willing to receive him, he would become a full member and remain there for life, unless released by Father Bentley or his successor.

Plainton accordingly resigned his curacy, and prepared to give up entirely this strange outer world, in order to devote himself exclusively to the Church of Christ.

At the invitation of Mrs. Fitzgerald he went to stay at Regent's Park until his arrangements were quite completed, and he could be received at Milton.

He had yet more than a week to wait. Before leaving the world altogether he felt a strong desire to walk once more by the river where so often he had wandered with Ethel and her sister. Since leaving Pollington he had occasionally met their brother, but them he had not seen. He would like to pay one

last visit to the old spot, associated as it was with so many varied memories.

The day was bright and clear. He proposed to his sister that she should accompany him. Lilian gladly consented. They put a few biscuits in their pocket, and took the first train they could catch to Brackley. When they arrived there, they walked up from the railway station through the old town, and turned down by the river.

It was more than three years since he had walked there with Ethel, and told her the story of the Rich Man's Jewel. About half way along the path was a seat in a recess almost hidden by the overhanging foliage of the trees. Here they sat down. A few yards farther on was the spot where he had rested with Ethel and her sister on the occasion above mentioned.

Here, then, he reposed, and looked dreamily into the water, watching the ripples, and listening to the music the water made amidst the reeds. Lilian knew

well his love of nature, and did not interrupt his reverie.

Presently light footsteps were heard along the path, and suddenly there stood before them Ethel and Kate. Ethel looked almost the child she did when he last saw her, so far as her face was concerned. The most marked difference was in her hair, which was now gathered up at the back of her head instead of flowing gracefully over her shoulders as of old.

On seeing Plainton she at first turned pale, and gazed at him with a sort of frightened look, as if she had seen an apparition. The next moment a deep flush spread over her neck and face, and a sudden joy beamed from her eyes.

Plainton was the first to recover speech.

‘How do you do, Kate? How are you, Ethel?’ said he heartily, with a smile of intense pleasure.

‘Where have you been all this time, you naughty boy?’ asked Ethel, holding his hand with both hers.

‘ I hardly know, Ethel. In dreamland, I think.’

They walked on together, Kate and Lilian in front.

Ethel looked up eagerly into Plainton’s face.

‘ Do you know how long it is since we saw one another ?’

‘ Yes, Ethel—more than three years.’

‘ Are you going to stay in London ?’

‘ No, my child,’ he replied in a constrained tone ; ‘ I am going away—soon.’

Ethel noticed the change, and asked :

‘ And where are you going ?’

Plainton was silent.

‘ Tell me where you are going, please, Mr. Plainton,’ said Ethel, in her childish way of bygone days.

‘ I do not think I can,’ he returned slowly.

‘ You are going abroad !’ exclaimed she.

‘ No, I am not.’

‘ Tell me, then, please,’ repressing a rising sob.

‘Wait a few moments.’

He was bewildered. This meeting, although it gave him exquisite pleasure, he was wholly unprepared for. Could he leave her in ignorance of his plans? No, he could not. Yet how was he to explain the course which he felt it his duty to take? At last he determined to put before her, as well as he could, the thoughts which had lain on his mind since he last saw her.

He spoke of his work as a clergyman; of the present state of the Church; of the desire which had taken possession of him to give himself up more exclusively to mission-work, and to separate himself more completely from ordinary social intercourse. He described with enthusiasm the noble self-sacrifice of Father Bentley, and of the men who had joined him, and then mentioned the steps he had himself taken to realise his notion of the highest and most useful life.

Ethel listened with ashen face, but in calm silence. When he paused, she asked softly :

‘Mr. Plainton, do you love me as much as you used?’

‘Yes, my child,’ he answered, looking earnestly into her face, ‘and shall always. Nothing can change that.’

She did not doubt him.

‘How long are you going to be with Father Bentley—is it for life?’ she asked, with a troubled look.

‘Not at first. The novitiate lasts for two years. If during that period it is found I have no vocation for such a life, I should have to leave. But if, at the end of that period, my own views are unchanged, and the Superior is satisfied, I should have to take life vows and carry out any mission-work assigned to me in any part of the world.’

‘Two years,’ repeated Ethel thoughtfully to herself—‘two years.’

Kate and Lilian now turned back.

‘I think,’ said Kate, ‘that we must be going home now.’

They all walked together to the end of the path. There they stopped to say farewell.

Plainton shook hands with Kate, and turned to Ethel. He held her hand for a moment, then bending his head, their lips met. It was their first kiss—must we say also their last?

Holding both her little hands in his, he traversed each feature with eager, wistful eye. He wondered at her calmness. There was a brave, even joyous look in her eyes, and her face was no longer pale, but slightly flushed. Why was it that she was so calm and content, now that he was about to be again separated from her—perhaps for ever? It is not very difficult to understand.

During three long, dreary years her whole being had suffered a drought. In accordance with her mother's commands she had not seen nor heard from Plainton. Suddenly she has found him. He does not love her less than he used, though now in years she is no longer a child; and he will still love her though he never see her again. She drank in this draught of happiness and was strengthened by it. Whatever came, she would henceforth

never doubt his affection. Had he not told her himself?

Further, she had received Love's first sacred kiss—it mattered not at the moment that it might also be the last—which had sent the blood bounding joyously through her veins. Her heart was glorified by it. Was not this something to feed on through the coming lonely years? Her lips had been pressed by his: none other than his should ever press them again, for that would be to sully the purity of the love he had shown her.

‘Good-bye, darling!’ said he, still holding her hands.

‘Good-bye, love!’ she replied, and they separated.

When Plainton and his sister arrived at the bushes where the path took a turn, he stopped and looked round. Kate and Ethel were expecting him to do so. They wave a last farewell, and the next moment have lost sight of one another.

We have but little more to add. Ten days afterwards Plainton entered upon his no-

vitiate at Milton, and there we take our leave of him.

It may be that at some future time we shall put before our readers the further history of the Reverend Enoch Hatter, Rector of Cunningstone—our late Vicar.

THE END.

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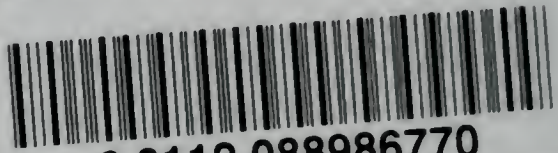
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